



## Introduction to Satire 3

*Candidates studying Juvenal for the A2 examination are required to read the whole of Satires 3, 14 and 15 in English in addition to the close study of those portions of Satires 14 and 15 which will be examined in Latin. This piece is a short introduction to the study of Satire 3.*

Satire 3 forms the central (and the longest) poem of the first book of Satires and is mostly taken up with a speech put into the mouth of Umbricius ('Mr Shade' or 'Mr Shady') who is justifying his decision to leave Rome. Juvenal meets him in a grotto near the Porta Capena where the Via Appia leaves Rome for the south of Italy.

Umbricius first (21-57) claims that he cannot abide living amidst the dishonesty of Rome, where native citizens like himself are pushed out by foreigners in general and Greeks in particular (58-125). Poor men like himself (he claims) are displaced in Rome by the vulgar rich (126-314). If he can no longer stay, then he must go (315-22).

Over against the dystopian vision of the noisy, violent and amoral city Umbricius posits an idealised and sentimental view of the purity and calm of the Italian countryside which has (he asserts) maintained the virtue and the decency of the good old days (cf. 312-4). It is possible that his name (Umbricius) hints at the Latin word *umbra* suggesting that he self-presents as a 'shade' of the ancient Romans, a virtuous throwback in a world of novel forms of vice.

The speech is a piece of rhetoric in the long tradition of 'town vs country' argumentation, such as we find (for example) in Seneca's *Controversiae* (2.1, 5.5) and Horace's wonderful fable of the town mouse and the country mouse in *Satires* 2.6. Umbricius delivers what is in some ways a set-piece 'farewell' speech: but with the difference that whereas other such speeches bid a fond farewell, this man is far from fond of the Rome he is leaving.



The key questions in the interpretation of this poem concern Umbricius. Is he a mouthpiece for the poet — so that the poet is ventriloquising his own ideas using the authority of this orator for added clout? Or is Umbricius being set up as a straw man (the naive loser yearning for the countryside: cf. Horace *Epodes* 2 for a similar piece of mockery) whom we are expected to mock? Is Umbricius (in other words) the medium or the message? The presenter or the target of the satire? Or neither? or both? Secondly, why does the poet choose to send him off to Cumae rather than anywhere else?

Suggestions for relevant points in answering this question are as follows. The narrator who quotes the speech does not follow his friend beyond the Porta Capena into the countryside but stays in Rome despite all its faults, and there is no comment passed after the end of the speech. In the opening introductory section the narrator seems to accept the perils of urban life ('fires and constant collapsing of buildings and the thousand dangers of the city' (7-9)) but then undercuts this with the bathetic climax of the perils of 'poets reciting in August' (9). The Porta Capena area is the closest part of the city to the countryside, but even here the place is urbanised and artificial, with marble spoiling the native tufa stone and with Jewish beggars now filling the place where an early king of Rome would encounter the nymph Egeria. Is our speaker saying this to show sympathy with what Umbricius is going to say? Or is it the narrator warning us against the sort of nostalgia which is going to follow?

The logic of the speech is that Rome is no longer Roman but rather filled with foreigners — and so paradoxically Umbricius will be happier in the Greek colony of Cumae than in the 'Greek city' which is Rome. Cumae was also regarded as the entrance to the underworld, which again may be significant: the speech paints Rome as something like the lowest circle of Hell, and it may be that the 'real' Underworld is preferable to the metaphorical one. Cumae was also famously home to the Sibyl, who (when asked what she wanted) said that she longed to die, according to a tale told by Petronius (*Satyricon* 48).

There are also warning signs about how unreliable Umbricius is as an authority. Umbricius is a failure in Rome (92-3) who can fit all his possessions on to one cart (10); his stance throughout is that of the worm's-eye view of the little man who envies the more successful, whose behaviour he lists but cannot emulate (30-40, 49-57). His hatred of Greeks is born of resentful envy (92-3: 'we say the same things that they do, but they are believed while we are



not'), as is his envy of the sex-life of a slave who can keep an upmarket mistress while he can only afford a cheap prostitute (132-6). He is not allowed to sit where he likes in the theatre (153-9) and is humiliated to be ordered out of his seat in public. In other words, his hatred of urban life is sour grapes. He has tried it and failed. He is a loser.

The grievances mount up, as (he argues) life is stacked against people like him. If there is a fire, then the poor man loses everything, while the rich man gets so much support from his rich cronies and clients that he ends up richer than he was to begin with (209-222). His idyllic view of the countryside (171-89), where everyone dresses alike in (pure) white tunics and nobody wears a toga ('unless they are dead') reflects his urban embarrassment, especially of the financial sort (182-3), rather than any real knowledge of the rural lifestyle. He romanticises rural poverty and idealises the past, with a sentimental view of a crime-free era (312-4) in the past when happy Romans only needed one prison. Is there a sense that his myopic view of elsewhere is being sent up as hopelessly naive and itself doomed to disillusion once he gets to Cumae?

That said, the speech is also a coruscating indictment of the city of Rome. Umbricius is most convincing when he is retailing the life of the streets and it is hard to read it without being captivated by its sheer range of detail. The mugger in the street (286-301), the impossibility of sleep (232-5), the fires in the wooden housing where the poorest inhabitants live on the top floor and so have no chance of escape (197-209), the risk of being hit on the head by falling pots or their noxious contents (269-77).

The poem works then on many levels. It is a parody of the pastoral idyll quoted by a narrator who lives in the city and will not follow his friend to Cumae. It is a narrative framing a set-piece speech produced without overt comment from the narrator. Juvenal uses the speech of Umbricius (as Horace does with Ofellus in *Satires* 2.2) to distance himself from the ideas there expressed, although similar thoughts recur elsewhere in the other fifteen satires of this poet, and inventing an interlocutor does not imply in itself that the poet disagrees with what is said — the use of direct speech is a common form of dramatisation and variety in what could otherwise be a tedious monologue, allowing the narrator to characterise his speaker and to create tension.

**Further Reading on *Satire 3* includes:**

Anderson W.S. *Essays in Roman Satire* (Princeton 1982) pp. 219-32

Braund S.M. *Juvenal Satires 1* (Cambridge, 1996) pp.230-236

Edwards C. *Writing Rome* (Cambridge 1996) pp.125-9

Fredericks S.C. 'The Function of the Prologue (1-20) in the Organization of Juvenal's Third Satire' *Phoenix* 27 (1973) pp.62-7

Hight G. *Juvenal the Satirist* (Oxford 1954) pp.65-75

Jones F. *Juvenal and the Satiric Genre* (London, Duckworth 2007) pp.85-87

Rudd N. *Johnson's Juvenal* (Bristol Classical Press 1981)

Witke E.C. 'Juvenal 3, an Eclogue for the Urban Poor' *Hermes* 90 (1962) pp.244-8