



Summary of Horace's Satires

Book One

- 1 The need to find contentment with one's lot, and the need to acquire the right habits of living in a state of carefree simplicity rather than being a lonely sad miser.
- 2 The need to practise safe sex: i.e. sex with women who are available and with whom one can have carefree relations. Adultery is a foolish game as (a) one cannot inspect the women before 'buying' and (b) it brings huge risks to health and reputation both in the fear of discovery and in being discovered and punished. Epicurean ethics of 'the little that is enough' means that whatever is available as a sexual outlet is preferable to pining with love for the unattainable.
- 3 The need to be indulgent to the faults of our friends if we want them to be indulgent towards us. The poet gives a quick version of Epicurean anthropology to explain the origins of morality and to discount the rigidity of Stoic ethics.
- 4 Horace's first literary manifesto. He discusses Lucilius' outspoken frankness and says that his poems are not really poetry at all but 'closer to everyday speech.' His choice of subject-matter is motivated not by malice but by a gentle desire to help others with the sort of good advice which his father had given him.
- 5 The journey to Brundisium. Horace went with Maecenas and other influential men (including Virgil) to conduct diplomatic discussions with Mark Antony in Spring 37BC. The poem avoids any overt political comment and focusses instead on the details of the journey and the accommodation 'enjoyed' or not.
- 6 Horace on his place in society: the son of a freedman he faces some criticism about his origins. His lack of political ambition gives him the freedom to enjoy his life more than the aggressive social climber.
- 7 A short poem outlining the quarrel between a certain Persius and Rutilius Rex.
- 8 A comic piece narrated by Priapus the god of fertility represented as a wooden statue in a garden where there had stood a cemetery where witches met to gather bones. The witches gather and the wooden god scatters them in terror when his 'figwood buttocks' break wind noisily.
- 9 Horace describes his encounter with a humourless pest who clings to him as he is walking along the Via Appia.
- 10 Following on the subject-matter of 4, Horace again looks at his predecessor Lucilius and repeats his criticism of him. Lucilius may indeed have 'scoured the city with his wit' but his style was that of a muddy river and he should have spent longer polishing and refining his verses.



Book 2

1 A literary discussion with the lawyer Trebatius about how to pitch his satires between the extremes of harsh cruelty on the one hand and pallid harmlessness on the other. Trebatius asks him why he does not write glorious epic to praise Octavian, if he has to write about something. Furthermore, Trebatius warns Horace about incurring the wrath of the powerful – to which Horace appeals to the precedent of Lucilius who had powerful friends who supported his unmasking of the ills of society.

2 A sermon ascribed to the thought of the countryman Ofellus arguing for the ‘simple life’ of frugality and healthy eating. The poem ends with a more philosophical touch as the speaker points out that his own farm has been taken by Umbrenus, that it will one day be taken from him – and that nothing can be possessed with permanence in the world.

3 Horace in conversation with a failed businessman Damasippus, who recounts the teachings of the Stoic teacher Stertinius who argued that only the wise man is sane; this leads to a colourful description of madness in society in all its forms (avarice, ambition, extravagance, love, superstition).

4 Catus gives the poet a resume of a lecture on the best sorts of food and drink to be served at a dinner party. Horace ends by asking Catus to let him accompany him to the next lecture.

5 A dialogue in the underworld between the hero Odysseus/Ulysses and the prophet and seer Tiresias on how to get on in Rome. –Tiresias recommends legacy-hunting and gives cynical instructions on how to secure a legacy. The poem is a burlesque of part of Homer’s *Odyssey* Book 11 and operates both on the level of parody of the Homeric original and also on the level of contemporary satire of modern Rome.

6 Town and country: Horace contrasts the idyllic life on his Sabine farm with the grim reality of life in the city of Rome. The point is well captured by the fable of the town mouse and the country mouse.

7 Horace’s slave Davus uses the freedom afforded by the festival of the Saturnalia to tell Horace that, as only the wise man is free, the poet is as much a slave as the slave is. Davus points out the inconsistency and the hypocrisy of the poet and argues that all forms of dependency and passion are equally enslaving to the soul.

8 An entertaining and comic account of a disastrous dinner party given by Nasidienus Rufus.