The Nature of Satire
Arto Paasilinna – *The Year of the Hare*

**Keywords**

Genre
Picaresque
Satire
Finnish Literature

*Genre* designates an organization of kinds of literary texts based on those texts’ inclusion of specific features—a tradition of categorization going back to Aristotle’s distinction between narrative (epic), lyric, and drama in the *Poetics*. A literary genre can be roughly categorized in terms of the kind of conflict and the units of the conflict. In the detective novel, the conflict may be public order versus private desire; justice versus violence; order versus disorder, and so forth. The units involved include the investigator, perpetrator, victim, and suspects, but also setting and narrative style (for example first person narration for certain kinds of detective fiction), as well as readerly expectations, such as the ultimate explanation of the crime.

*Year of the Hare* is regarded as a **picaresque novel**, one of the oldest forms of the novel dating back to medieval Spain. The protagonist (the key unit of conflict) of the picaresque novel is lower than us, an antihero. He or she is not dignified, honest, industrious, steadfast, sober, and powerful, but pragmatic, clever, unpredictable, and witty. The picaresque novel is organized episodically around the antihero’s misadventures as he journeys through society. As the antihero takes different jobs and does different things, he finds himself in conflicting situations, seeking to obey different masters. The picaresque is a conflict between the powerful and the outsider, social order and challenges to it.

*Satire* designates a literary work that creates laughter about a figure, institution, or entity in order to mock it and show its problems. The literary scholar M.H. Abrams points out, that satire differs from comedy because comedy cultivates laughter for its own sake, while satire uses laughter as a weapon. *The Year of the Hare* satirizes the Finnish Ministry of Defense by making sport of its use of the Army to impress foreign guests.

*Finnish Literature* includes literary works in Finnish and Swedish, as well as Sami. Finnish literature in Finnish begins with the *Kalevala*, first published in 1835. Its first novel, *The Seven Brothers* (1870), is a picaresque novel, about seven roguish brothers who flee their village and spend ten years living in the forest before learning to become men, after which they return to become members of society. *Year of the Hare* is typical of definitive aspects of Finnish literature; its protagonist is an everyday person but also an antihero; the action in the novel is set in the countryside and close to nature; humor and even the grotesque are used to define an individual and critical perspective on modern Finnish society.
Questions for Discussion

1. Who are Vatanen’s masters in *Year of the Hare*?
2. Is Vatanen trying to solve a problem in the novel? If so, what is it?
3. What is one of the more humorous episodes in the novel?
   a. What makes it funny?
   b. Are we laughing for fun, for the sake of laughin?
   c. Or is our laughter being used as a weapon?
4. How would you describe Vatanen’s relationship to nature?
5. How would you describe his relationship to the Finnish state?
6. What conflict is at the core of *Year of the Hare*?