

# Diatribes

## Definition of Diatribe

Diatribes are violent or bitter criticisms of something or someone. It is a rhetorical device used as a verbal attack against a person, group, institution, or a particular behavior. Merriam Webster defines diatribe as, “An angry and usually long speech or piece of writing that strongly criticizes someone or something.” Its purpose is to point out the follies and weaknesses of something or someone. However, if the focus of criticism diverts from targeting the main object, it may become negative or destructive criticism on account of its harshness.

## Examples of Diatribe in Literature

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### Example #1: *Heart of Darkness* (By Joseph Conrad)

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Joseph Conrad’s [narrative](#) *Heart of Darkness* is based on forced labor of subjugated Africans, as well as the mistreatment and beatings by European colonialists. This serves as an adequate diatribe of imperialism and colonialist countries. The tone of this account is sympathetic toward Africans, while the [character](#) Marlowe describes imperialism as:

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or who have slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing...”

Further, he uses severe criticism terming it a “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale,” and Europeans “grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got.”

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### Example #2: *Cherry Orchard* (By Anton Chekov)

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The character Trofimov appears a stronger person in Act II of Anton Chekov's *Cherry Orchard*, and also the only person who speaks out words of wisdom. In one of the scenes, Trofimov and Lopakhin begin quarrelling, needled by Lopakhin's remarks about his status as "eternal student," and his flirtation with Anya. Thereby, Trofimov launches a diatribe against Lopakhin and Russian intelligentsia, as they failed to improve the social conditions of deprived people by saying,

"The vast majority of those intellectuals whom I know seek for nothing, do nothing, and are at present incapable of hard work. They call themselves intellectuals, but they use 'thou' and 'thee' to their servants, they treat the peasants like animals, they learn badly, they read nothing seriously, they do absolutely nothing, about science they only talk, about art they understand little ..."

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### **Example #3: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)**

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In the chambers of Polonius, Laertes counsels Ophelia to rebuff the advances of Prince Hamlet. Laertes uses diatribe by describing Hamlet in this manner:

"For Hamlet and the trifling of his favor,  
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,  
A violet in the youth of primy nature,  
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting."

Meanwhile, Polonius enters and launches his own diatribe about the topic going on between Laertes and Ophelia, saying:

"Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers  
Not of that dye which their investments show."

He calls Prince Hamlet a robust who is just playing with her feelings.

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### **Example #4: *Gulliver's Travels* (By Jonathan Swift)**

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In *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift attacks humanity. Swift not only uses [satire](#), but also a diatribe against the follies of human learning, aristocracy, royalty, government of England, the dominant Whig Party, and war with France. He criticizes the failures and flaws of humanity to develop its order, reason, and harmony. His first voyage represents a commentary on the [moral](#) state and political events of England. For instance, Swift describes Lilliputians as six inches in height, displaying a smallness and pettiness symbolic of human institutions, such as state and church, and the Lilliputian Emperor represents English King George I.

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#### **Example #5: *The Canterbury Tales* (By Geoffrey Chaucer)**

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Geoffrey Chaucer has employed bitter criticism in his collection of stories, *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer attacks Monk violently, by saying that, though his duty is to serve churches and people, instead he takes an interest in hunting and riding most of the time. Then comes the Friar, a clergyman whose duty is to hear confessions of the people, but he has married several women in the town. Chaucer describes him:

“He hadde made ful many a marriage/ Of yonge women at his owene cost.”

Similarly, Chaucer criticizes other characters, such as a nun, the Prioress, the Wife of Bath, the Parson, the Summoner, and the Pardoner.

#### **Function of Diatribe**

Diatribe sharpens the critical faculty of writers. It also enables readers to understand and access a work, lending it a powerful effect on their lives. Diatribes or bitter criticisms appeal to multiple readers in different ways, due to their conflicting interpretations and comparisons about the objects criticized. In addition, diatribe makes readers aware of good and bad qualities of the objects and persons in question. Besides, it is very common in literary works, politics, and everyday speech.