

# Alexander pope and jonathan swift as satirists similarities and dissimilarities



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Johnson in his Dictionary defines satire as a poem “ in which wickedness or folly is censured” J. A Cuddon in his Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory calls this definition by Johnson “ a limiting one” while comparing this definition with Dryden’s whose claim is that “ The true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction”. If we keep these definitions in mind, we can observe many writers censuring follies and improving the flaws. Some of these writers show certain similarities among themselves, while others have contrast in their own way, yet the purpose has always been correction. of the society. If we compare, the works of these two contemporary writers and poets of 18th century, Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744), there are certain things, which they share and are common in their works.

Every writer is the child of his age. Whatever the poet or writer observes in the society, and whatever are the literary trends prevalent, the writer will naturally be influenced and will faithfully depicts those influences his or her work. Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope are no exception and beyond any doubt they portray in their writings whatever they observed in their surroundings. To understand their level of satire, it is essential that we should have a glance over the age they were living in.

The period in the English literature from 1700 to about 1750 is called the Augustan Age. The term comes from the name given to the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus for his grandiose achievement in the Roman Empire. The Augustus reign, which lasted from 27 B. C. to A. D. 14, Latin literature reached its pinnacle and produced great writers such as, Virgil, Horace and Ovid. The English authors also tried to imitate and recapture

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these philosophic and literary ideals by imitating them. Just like Romans, these authors believed that life and literature should be guided by reason and common sense. To achieve this they always strove for balance and harmony in their writings and for this reason, the Augustan Age in English literature is also known as the neoclassical period.

Satire was one of the most common types of literature during the Augustan. Despite the emphasis on reason often these satires were extremely bitter, personal, and extremely unreasonable in their expression. The leading satirists of the period were Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. Swift satirized differing interpretations of Christianity in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704). In *The Battle of the Books* (1704), he ridiculed a literary dispute of the day. The dispute was between the scholars who preferred ancient authors and those who thought that modern authors were superior. Swift attacked the hypocrisy he saw in kings, courtiers, and teachers in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which is one of the most famous satirical works in the English literature.

Pope ridiculed the behavior of fashionable society in *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-1714). He wrote with cutting wit about the authors of his time and their dull books in *The Dunciad* (1728-1743). Pope perfected the heroic couplet in *An Essay on Man* (1733-1734) and in *Moral Essays* (1731-1735). In *An Essay on Man*, Pope advised readers to take the middle way in all things. In *Moral Essays*, he discussed the nature of men and women and the uses of wealth. Other famous writers of the age like, Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele also criticized the social customs and attitudes of the day in their outstanding essays.

When it comes the question of similarities between Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, we can observe that both are dissatisfied with the situations of institutions of their time. They are against the false conventions and the dual and hypocritical standards of the society. Alexander Pope in his *The Rape of the Lock* gives us an amusing picture of the ladies of his time. He narrates the vanities of the society and mentions that ladies do not end with death, as most of the ladies would even feign in their death rather than die actually. He provides a satirical division of ladies of different temperaments categorizing into different categories- fiery termagants, yielding ladies, grave, prudes and light coquettes. He mocks at the extravagant aspirations of the ladies who imagined matrimonial alliances with princes and dukes and dreamt of, “ garters, stars, and coronets”. Pope ridicules the fickleness and superficiality of the ladies by referring to their hearts as “ moving toy-shops” and their varying vanities.

We can see the same portrayal by Jonathan Swift in his well-known bitter and sarcastic satire *Gulliver’s Travels*. The only difference between the two writers is that Jonathan Swift is more meticulous and detailed in his satire, which makes it easy to see the hidden allegorical tone. Gulliver’s account of the annoyance of the Empress of Lilliput and extinguishing the fire in her apartment by urinating on it is Swift’s unique way of satire, which was meant to show annoyance at Queen Ann. As Queen Ann was angry at his earlier work, *The Tale of Tub*, in which he attacked religious abuses, however it was misinterpreted by making it as an attack on religion. Gulliver’s account of the conspiracy against him and his impending impeachment is Swift’s satirical description of court-intrigues were common features of political life

in England at that time. Thus we can say that both writers have similar characteristic, when it comes to mock on false and hypocritical standards of society in general and women in particular, however Swift was bitterer than Pope.

18th century was the age of revival of classics in English literature. The poets of this century, not only revived the classic pattern of poetry, but they also imbibed the moral values of the time. As a result, when they observed such ill practices of the society, they were prone to depict it directly in their works in verse or in prose form. Instead of narrating the original stories and incidents, they would transform the stories according to their own wish and whims or as the work required. For example, Swift Philemon and Baciis is based on a classical story of an aged couple that lived in a poor cottage in Phrygia. When Zeus and Hermes traveled in disguise over Asia, they entertained the gods

hospitably, and Zeus transformed their home into a splendid temple, with old couple exalted to become priest and priestess. After having lived to extreme old age, they died in the same hour according to their request, and were changed into yew trees, whose boughs intertwined. Swift transforms this story through a speech of the disguised saints,

“ Good folks, you need not be afraid, We are but saints,” the hermits said;“  
No hurt shall come to you or yours; But, for that pack of churlish boors, Not  
fit to live on Christian ground, They and their houses shall be drowned;

Jonathan Swift is quite satirical towards the Christians not possessing the Christian values. According to him, they do not deserve to live on Christian  
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land therefore “ their houses shall be drowned”. The level of satire is quite evident, However we must remember that we are dealing with Jonathan Swift who does not hate mankind but hates that “ animal called man”.

Alexander Pope believed, that classics must be revived to achieve sublimity and grandness in English literature. He took the classics form to propagate Christian values, but he failed to realize that only the outward form is not sufficient to achieve sublimity. Without owing a lofty spirit, it is not possible to express grand ideas and only lofty spirits can perceive grand themes like “ fall of man” and “ justifying the ways of God to man”. When Pope tried to revive the classics without enough spirit, the result was a mock epic. His translation of Homer could not create the Homeric expression, yet his work enjoys extraordinary popularity because of his attractive way in which, he describes things. Even though his style is quite didactic yet he is not bitter like Swift. To put him in the right words, he laughs “ with the people”, unlike Swift who laughs “ at the people”.

Jonathan Swift in his A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General laments the senselessness and cruelty of the soldiers who are venerated in their lifetime but he mentions that the veneration is not a true praise rather it is due to the fear and power army carry. Therefore the famous general will die in the words of Sir Walter Scott in his Lay of the Last Minstrel

“ And doubly dying shall go down

To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,

Unwept, unhonoured and unsung”

The same wording can be found in A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Great General where the poet says:

“ How very mean a thing’s a duke,

From all his ill-got honors flung,

Turn’d to that dust from whence he sprung”

Unlike Swift, Alexander Pope was more concerned about literature than politics. About politics he seems to be satisfied when he says in his Windsor Forest:

“ Not thus the land appear’d in ages past, A dreary desert and a gloomy waste, To savage beasts and savage laws a prey, [45]And kings more furious and severe than they;”

Pope was essentially a bookish and literary man by nature. His first major satire, the Dunciad was naturally focused on the pretentiousness and dullness of second-rate writers. His famous Essay on Criticism begins with an exposition of the rules of taste and the authority to be attributed to the ancient writers. The laws by which a critic should be guided are discussed and instances are given of the critics who have departed from them.

The language adopted by Jonathan Swift to convey his annoyance is very simple and plain. There is no strong verbiage to entangle the reader in the labyrinth of words. He wants the readers to reach the crux of the matter instantly. The way he starts his Baucis and Philemon is a proof of his simple approach in language

“ In ancient times, as story tells, The saints would often leave their cells, And stroll about, but hide their quality, To try good people’s hospitality”

On the other hand Alexander Pope used poetic diction as his main weapon of poetic influence. He was blindly imitating the classics and loved their sublime style. He borrowed his style from the classics without their true and forceful spirit. Pope was a conscientious artist and a laborious craftsman. He was not satisfied with anything short of perfection. His main aim was to express best thoughts in the best words. His best thoughts were often borrowed from others, but his expression of these thought was his own. His ideal was “ correctness” and correctness with Pope consists, among other things, “ the passionate search for and triumphant finding of the exact words” to express, what he felt and thought.

The Compton-Rickett in A History of English Lite, rature has described about the craftsmanship of Pope in the following words “ If he is not to be reckoned with the master spirits of English literature, he was at any rate an incomparable craftsman and a delightful wit. And that is no small matter.” S. T. Coleridge praised Pope’s poetic diction as, “ the almost faultless position and choice of words”. But Cazamian says, “ English classical poetry formed itself upon scrupulous searching for perfection” This perfection refers not to ideas or thoughts or emotions, but to form and style. This statement of Cazamian is applicable to almost all the poets of the age, however Jonathan Swift is different in this respect, because he does not use any bombastic words as for him, the best way is direct expression rather than playing with words.



From another dimension in the choice of words for poetry, Pope has upper hand, when it come to comparison between him and Swift. Pope has often used some brilliant epigrams, one such example is In An Essay on Criticism, where he used a number of epigrams, which have become part of the literary heritage of English language. These epigrams are: " A Little learning is a dangerous thing", " To err is human, to forgive, divine", and " For fools rush in where angels fear to tread". Pope's this tendency gives an extra edge to his poetry and of course to the satire he uses. Its effects are far-reaching and everlasting.

Jonathan Swift is exceptional and unique in his treatment of satire according to Brian Vickers, " In Swift's satire we see a traveler telling the representatives of imaginary societies, the weaknesses of our own society, and the direct nature of such satire being put in an indirect frame is reinforced by the instructive comments of the listener, discourse becomes dialogue, for Swift adds a second actor and revolutionizes the form as much as Aeschylus did." Pope is direct in his satire, he speaks like a venerated preacher delivering the sermon on the pulpit. In his Essay on Man, he preaches that man should consider it a gift of God that he had been kept blind to the future. Otherwise who would love to live?

" Heaven from all creatures hides the book of Fate

All but the page prescribed, their present state:

From brutes what men, from men what spirits know

Or who could suffer being here below?"

Swift is more well known in his satirical approach in prose compared to poetry as has been truly proved in his Gulliver's Travels, which is full of follies and satire of English society. Swift has satirized all the corners of English life in his prose work, be it the political structure, the aristocratic frivolities of life, the religious conflicts, the moral degradation of the society, and above all the inability of human being to be rational.

His satire is often sharp and intense ranking human being inferior to yahoos (horses). Pope satire is less sharp, and he does not become hysterical like Swift in his approach.

Pope often talks about the moral values, the religious attitude and literary misinterpretations. He often portrays a false grand literary style, in which he was not successful but no doubt, he has a great place among all the famous writers of English literature.

Swift was perhaps revengeful and has gone to extreme limits because of his personal disappointments in life, and Pope tried to imitate a style, which was not original. We can count upon number of similarities and dissimilarities between these two poets however the truth is both of these writer aim was one and same, which was to tell the truth about the falsehood in the society, in which they have been successful and for this reason, both have earned a unique place in English literature.