

Laughing at the 18th century: social critique in gulliver's travels and the rape ...

[Experience](#), [Laughter](#)



Throughout both *The Rape of the Lock* and *Gulliver's Travels*, Pope and Swift both place the faults and vices of 18th Century Britain at the thematic forefront of their writing, with a particular focus on satirizing the upper echelons of the aristocratic class, as well as attitudes towards sexuality, gender and religion which underpinned contemporary society. Through the inclusion of real-life figures - Swift's narrative includes references to the corrupt Robert Walpole whilst Pope's revolves around a factual event - both writers place 'serious' aspects of 18th Century society within the realm of the absurd. Indeed, both writers choose to mimic popular narrative structures - whilst Swift's use of mock epic brings classical heroism into closer juxtaposition with contemporary triviality, employing the 'heroic couplet' (popular in classical tales of bravery such as Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*) as well as a variety of stock epic narrative devices, Swift's decision to imitate a conventional, non-fictional 'travel narrative' pokes fun at the gullibility of his readers, simultaneously attacking the idea of human autonomy and control lauded by work such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (as the critic Kathleen Williams states, Swift was 'hostile to all doctrines of the natural self-sufficiency of man'). By filling their work with recognizable elements of contemporary Britain, therefore, both writers can more effectively parody and satirize 18th Century society. In the same way, both writers develop a clear divergence between their own voice and that of the 'narrator'. This can be seen most apparently in Swift's work, which, far from representing the singular, fixed viewpoint of an author, uses shifts in the perspective of its protagonist (notably from admiration of British society to utter repulsion) to highlight the absence of any singular, convincing moral

standard, philosophy or idea underpinning contemporary British society. The same divergence is used by Pope, whose mock-epic narrative voice is entirely caught up in the scale and magnitude of the events it depicts, allowing the writer to effectively demonstrate what is, in his eyes, their triviality. However, here, differences begin to appear between the two writers – whilst Pope’s narrative voice, although largely ironic, is at least somewhat sincere in its praise of the trivial, simultaneously mocking the absurd complexity of Belinda’s makeup routine whilst celebrating the miraculous physical change it brings about, Swift’s strong belief in ‘original sin’ means that he presents human nature as being irredeemably flawed. Despite differences in their method, it is clear that both writers present a critical view of 18th Century society, employing and mimicking many of its more recognizable elements in order to more effectively parody and satirize it.

Both writers play on conventional narrative structure, form and voice to explore and satirize various elements within 18th Century society. For instance, Pope’s use of mock-epic to describe Belinda’s makeup routine juxtaposes the ‘serious’ and the trivial, allowing him to effectively satirize human vanity: ‘Unnumber’d Treasures open at once, and here The various Off’rings of the World appear’. Here, Pope’s use of the heroic couplet – a rhyming couplet written in iambic pentameter – mirrors the form used in weightier, classical work, contrasting with the everyday subject matter: the application of makeup. This contrast would have been all the more apparent to a contemporary audience, the majority of whom would have been familiar with John Dryden’s prolific use of the heroic couplet in translations of epics

such as Virgil's Aeneid and Homer's Iliad, creating a highly satirical image of an almost religious level of devotion being applied to an everyday act of self-care and, in doing so, laying strong emphasis not only on Belinda's personal vanity, but also on the level of importance which British society placed upon something so insignificant as outward appearance. This contrast is heightened by the connotations of religious ritualism in 'Off'rings', as well as the materialistic 'Treasures'. The use of such hyperbole to describe a makeup box is perhaps a satire on the limited knowledge and experience of the wealthy, aristocratic classes - their 'treasures' are restricted to makeup and jewellery, a point which Pope further supports with the use of the expansive connotations of 'World', implying that Belinda's 'world' extends little beyond the confines of her makeup box, let alone her social class.

In Swift's novel, the limited perspective of the aristocratic class is also satirized, with the vast contrast between the Lilliputian emperor's physical size and social grandeur humorously demonstrating the superficiality of the aristocratic world: 'terror of the universe, whose dominions extend five thousand blustrugs (about twelve miles in circumference)'. Here, in the emperor's description of himself, the incessant use of connotations of grandeur in 'universe', 'dominion', 'extend' and 'thousand', particularly with the frequent use of long vowel sounds here, adds a strong tone of majesty and scale, laying significant emphasis on the contrast between the emperor's perception of himself and Gulliver's perception of him - similar to the contrast between Belinda's makeup box and the 'Off'rings of the World'. The use of an unfamiliar measurement in 'blustrugs' makes the emperor's

claims all the more meaningless to the reader, whilst the contrast between the specificity of ' five thousand blustrugs' and the vague, dismissive ' about' in Gulliver's interjection ' about twelve miles' paints him in an even more absurd light. Much like Pope, this satirizes the limited perspective of an aristocracy overly concerned with material wealth, unable to see past their own ' dominion'. However, it also raises interesting questions about the irrelevance of temporal power in the context of a universe beyond knowledge or control - an idea which perhaps stems from the Catholic belief in the insignificance of humanity in the face of an all-controlling God (both Pope and Swift were Catholic). Furthermore, after the ' Glorious Revolution' of 1688, Catholics were faced with discrimination at the hands of protestant members of the government and aristocracy, perhaps forming the root of Swift's portrayal of a puny, insignificant emperor unaware of the realities of the ' universe' he claims to terrorise.

This harsh assessment of contemporary aristocracy is made all the more stinging by what Rawson describes as a ' guard-lowering ruse, an impression of truth' - Swift's use of a mock travel narrative mimics a form made so familiar by work such Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, both lulling the reader into a false sense of security (which is immediately shattered by the introduction of the tiny Lilliputians) and, like Pope's mock-epic, bringing the positive, never-say-die attitude of Defoe's travel narrative into closer juxtaposition with Swift's satire on human insignificance. In this way, Swift's novel can be read not only as a satire on 18th century Britain, but on the various sectors of contemporary literature which reflect its hopelessly

unrealistic self-image. Through this lens, Pope's use of mock epic could equally be seen to satirise the over the top elements of classical heroism, demeaning the entire form by applying it to a trivial setting. However, whilst this is perhaps true to an extent, Pope's background in the translation of classical epic (he is known for his translations of the Iliad and Odyssey) demonstrates a deep appreciation of the genre - an appreciation which he also applies to the elements of British society which he satirises so frequently. Adrian Blamires describes this as 'empathetic satire', stating that Pope 'maintains a simultaneous mockery of, and engagement with, the female world', capturing its 'vibrant animation'. This is certainly accurate, as Pope's internal rhyme in 'sees by degrees a purer blush arise', combined with the assonant, exotic personification in 'all Arabia breathes from yonder box', reflects the joy and romance of Belinda's world, even in spite of its naivety. In this way, whilst Swift's satire offers little empathy in its condemnation of 18th century society, Pope seems to differ, enjoying its more trivial aspects whilst satirising the disproportionate weight which it attributes to them.

This idea of a confused, disproportionate value system is one that is used by both writers to satirize 18th century society. For instance, The Rape of the Lock is described by John Mullan as being full of 'ludicrous disproportion', an effect which Pope achieves through the juxtaposition between the classics and modernity: 'Or stain her honour, or her new Brocade, Forget her Prayers, or miss a masquerade'. Here, the double use of a zeugma compares the classical, stoic connotations of 'honour' and 'prayers' to the shallow

materialism of ' Brocade' and ' Masquerade', highlighting the conflation of classical values and modern promiscuity and, in doing so, placing the ' serious' and the trivial on the same level of significance. This massive exaggeration of the importance of Belinda's ' Brocade' satirises an 18th century aristocratic value system in which materialism is placed above all else, with the lingering, repeated ' m' sound in ' miss a masquerade' adding to the overall tone of decadence and luxury. This wild disproportionality undermines the increasingly popular idea of man as a rational being - an idea embodied by the scientific experimentation that was becoming ever more abundant during the Enlightenment. Swift also criticises this idea of inherent human rationality in his depiction of the Academy of Lagado: ' He has been eight years upon a project for extracting sunbeams out of cucumbers, which were to be put in phials hermetically sealed... he did not doubt, that, in eight years more, he should be able to supply the governor's gardens with sunshine.' Here, the contextual significance of a scientific ' academy' should not be ignored, with the popularity of such institutions in the 18th century leading contemporary scientist Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle to describe the period as ' The Age of Academies', confirming the idea that Swift is attacking the growing scientific movement. Indeed, this movement contradicted his belief in human irrationality, a belief demonstrated by the utterly absurd image of ' extracting sunbeams out of cucumbers' - by portraying science itself as irrational, turns the pinnacle of contemporary ' rationality' into a further manifestation of man's irrationality. The repetition of ' eight years' underlines the ridiculousness of the situation, highlighting the quantity of time and resources consumed in a vain pursuit of

rationality, whilst the use of specific, scientific terminology in 'hermetically' and 'phials' places Swift's satire firmly within the realm of cutting edge science at the time and, in doing so, demonstrates the irrelevance of even the most up to date ideas and equipment when scientific progress is made futile by a human nature. The disproportionate significance placed upon the pursuit of reason mirrors Pope's portrayal of an out of kilter aristocratic value system, whilst Swift's idea of an inherent, ineradicable flaw in human nature is deliberately contrasted to the 'perfect' rationality of the Houyhnhnms (whose name translates to 'Perfection of Nature'). However, rather than as a moral objective, Williams describes the Houyhnhnms as 'a satiric contrast in which good and less good are mixed in a proportion which we must decide for ourselves'. Indeed, on various occasions, their unquestioning logic spills over into dispassion: 'the question that was to be debated was, whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the earth'. Here, the reasonable, restrained connotations of 'question' and 'debated' contrast dramatically with ideas of mass, indiscriminate slaughter in 'exterminated from the face of the earth', highlighting the subordination of compassion to cold reason and logic. Gulliver's acceptance of cruelty as 'superior' highlights the fragility of 18th century moral values that many thought underpinned contemporary society - they quickly deteriorate when an alternative is presented. Furthermore, this lack of human empathy, particularly when combined with Swift's decision to portray the Houyhnhnms as animals rather than another variation of mankind, highlights again the disparity between the two species, this time demonstrating the inability of humanity to replicate the level of rational 'perfection' exhibited by the Houyhnhnms. In

this way, Swift satirises 18th Century society's inability to adhere to the values of rationalism to which it was beginning to hold itself, tying in with his criticism of scientific advancement, as well as Pope's depiction of a society where rational, considered interaction is compromised by materialism. Furthermore, Swift's depiction of humanity's inability to separate itself from its nature perhaps ties in with his strong belief in 'original sin', leading Williams to describe the ideal laid out by the Houyhnhnms as being 'not simply unattainable by man, but irrelevant to him'; rather than being an aspirational standard, Swift employs them as a satiric device intended to highlight the futilities of 18th Century Britain through comparison with rational 'perfection'. In this way, Pope's depiction of a disproportionate, irrational value system is built upon by Swift, who chooses to highlight not only the fragility of these 'values', but also their incompatibility with human nature.

Furthermore, both writers use specific elements underpinning this value system, such as class, gender and political integrity, to more effectively satirise the fabric of 18th century British society. For example, in *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope subverts traditional notions of masculinity in an attempt to parody and satirise contemporary high society: 'But chiefly Love - to Love and alter built... Then prostrate falls, and begs with ardent eyes Soon to obtain, and long possess the Prize'. Here, the strong connotations of powerless passivity in 'prostrate falls' and 'begs' contrast with the heroic, masculine figures littered throughout romantic encounters in classical epic, underscoring the Baron's inability to occupy the role of the traditional male

hero. Furthermore, as Simon Mold points out when he claims that Pope 'deliberately imitates... a number of typical stock scenes', the use of ritual and sacrifice was common throughout the work of writers such as Homer, further heightening the contrast between classical heroism and the Baron's sexual fetishism. Combined with the reduction of 'Love' (a prized modern and classical value) to the shallow, sexual connotations of 'ardent', as well as further ideas of materialism in 'Prize', 'obtain' and 'possess', Pope uses the Baron's emasculation to highlight the degeneration of classical values in contemporary aristocratic society, as well as to satirise the shallow sexual desire that lies behind much of classical romance. Blamires suggests that Pope goes further with his satire on gender, stating that 'Pope's satire is on female credulity'. This certainly ties in with Pope's early depiction of Belinda's dream involving the sylph Ariel: 'A Youth more glitt'ring than a Birth-night Beau (That even in slumber caus'd her cheek to glow)'. Here, Pope's speculations on the inner life of a young, aristocratic woman paints a picture of a sex largely divorced from reality, with the phrase 'caus'd her cheek to glow' demonstrating the presence of an element of sexual curiosity - the connotations energy and life in 'glow' demonstrate the youthful nature of this curiosity. The alliterative 'Birth-night Beau', combined with the vivid connotations of 'glitt'ring', lays emphasis on the strength of her fantasy, contrasting with the base, undignified reality of the only real 'sexual' encounter she experiences in the poem (the theft of her hair) to satirise what Pope saw as feminine conceit and naivety. To illustrate this point, Blamires points to the phrase 'maids alone and Children are reveal'd', which he states places 'women intellectually on a par with children'.

Equally, Swift also chooses to satirise the 'inner lives' of women, subverting traditional ideas about feminine modesty in order to deconstruct human dignity: 'so varied with spots, pimples and freckles that nothing could appear so nauseous'. Here, in his description of the Brobdingnagian women, the use of three plural nouns in conjunction highlights the extent of their imperfection, whilst the connotations of sickness in 'nauseous' emphasise the extent of Gulliver's disgust. Combined with the at once lewd and animalistic 'monstrous breast', this deconstructs the traditional notion of feminine beauty and decency, again hinting at the inherent animalism of humanity. Indeed, Rawson describes this universal deformity as 'the physical counterpart of original sin', once again tying in with both Swift's religious beliefs and his apparent contempt for 18th century society.

However, Gulliver's disgust is hugely ironic, as similar imperfections will doubtless have been visible to the Lilliputians on his own body - he is placed on the same level as a people whose humanity was so doubtful that he was tempted to 'dash them against the ground'. Through this dramatic reversal of roles, Swift creates a bewildering satire on vanity, reducing the idea of human uniqueness and superiority to total absurdity and corroborating Griffin's suggestion that Swift is attempting to destabilise 'traditional moral certainties'. Such moral uncertainty is mirrored in his parody of contemporary politics, highlighting the extent to which inherent human irrationality permeated 18th century society: 'Flimnap, the treasurer, is allowed to cut a caper on the strait rope'. Here, the playful connotations of 'caper' emphasise the meaningless nature of the tasks performed by politicians in order to gain rank within the government, contrasting with the

formal title of 'The Treasurer' to satirically point out the dissonance between the high reward and low level of qualification. Indeed, Flimnap could easily refer to Robert Walpole - Prime minister from 1715 until 1717 (and then again from 1727 to 1740 after the book was published) - who allegedly maintained power through personal connections as opposed to personal attainment. By comparing the machinations of the British political system with inane, child-like games, Swift satirises any pretence of rationality that may have existed within 18th century society.

Although Pope's satire is perhaps more empathetic to its subjects, its criticisms of aristocratic small-mindedness are mirrored in Swift's work, whilst the absurd comparisons which he draws between the classical and the modern are perhaps rooted in the same ideas that led Swift to mock the message of human self-determination and control that characterised contemporary travel narratives - a firm belief in both human irrationality and the frailty of social prestige. Through their examinations of topics such as gender and politics, both writers apply this idea in order to provide a cutting satire the vices of an 18th century society unable to conform to its own standards of rationality, morality and restraint.