

The child-like scientist: a study of the similarities between jonathan swifts' gu...

[Science](#)



A child has the ability to make the most critical and objective observation on society and the behavior of man. How is this possible? A child has yet to mature and lacks proper education and experience. However, it is for this very reason that a child would make the perfect social scientist; his or her naivete may provide an excellent means of objective criticism and most often satire. A child's curious nature and hunger for knowledge would bring about an unbiased questioning of social structures, minus the brainwashing of these very institutions, and his or her vulnerability would expose any societal dangers present. This child-like scientist would see the truth as it is. This same premise may be applied to literary works. A naive character or narrator may be used as a child-like scientist, who reveals social truths to the audience through his or her naivete. As Maurois has noted, in writing about *Candide*, by Voltaire, "It was novel of apprenticeship, that is, the shaping of an adolescent's ideas by rude contact with the universe" (101). Jonathan Swift also takes this approach in his work *Gulliver's Travels*, where Gulliver, the main character, provides a naive point of reference. The satires *Gulliver's Travels*, by Jonathan Swift, and *Candide*, by Voltaire, both make use of naivete to convey satirical attacks on society. In both works, litotes [understatements] are made of extremely absurd situations, which further illuminates the ridiculous nature of a situation. Characters in each novel are made vulnerable by their overly trusting natures. This is taken advantage of, and these characters are left exploited by corrupt people in society. Attacks are also made on authority figures of the world. This can be seen in the characters' reaction to authority. Finally, both works are travel tales, which expose the main characters to many perspectives. This allows the authors to

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satirize many aspects of society. These two satirical works make litotes of preposterous situations, thus shedding light on the absurdity at hand. This is an especially effective technique, because a character or narrator is involved in a ridiculous situation. The reader, from an aesthetic distance, is then able to recognize the foolishness of the incident. After careful consideration, a satirical conclusion may be drawn. For example, Voltaire's narrator describes a brutal battle scene in a lighthearted manner: Nothing could have been more splendid, brilliant, smart or orderly than the two armies then rifle fire removed from our best of worlds about nine or ten thousand scoundrels who had been infesting its surface. The bayonet was also the sufficient reason for the death of several thousand men. (22-23) The diction in this passage is ironic. By referring to a battle as "splendid" (22) and "brilliant" (22), the narrator demonstrates how common the idea of warfare has become and how little the human life is valued. Also, the phrase, "Our best of worlds" (22-23) identifies optimism as a focus of this satirical attack (Maurois 100). In this way, the narrator nonchalantly discusses grave matters. Maurois cited both Voltaire and Swift as using this method when he states, "and from the Dean [Swift] he [Voltaire] had learned how to tell an absurd story in the most natural manner" (104). In this way, the foolish scenarios stand out in the context of "serious" discourse, and when taken in on a satirical level, the narrator's carefree consideration of dreadful events suggests a desensitizing of society. Quintana, in his essay "Situation as a Satirical Method," describes Swifts' satire as a "situational satire." In this method a situation is created and objectively observed in order to produce satirical attacks (344-346). This method is the same as the one described

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earlier. The audience, once having stepped back from the dramatic situation, realizes the absurdity of it, and the satirical point being made. When speaking with the King of Brobdingnag, Gulliver describes many absurd characteristics of human life in Europe, which to Gulliver, seem noble. He especially treats gunpowder with litotes (Bk. I, ch. 6-7). The lofty manner in which Gulliver presents his culture ironically accents the ignoble qualities of Europe. Another example may be drawn from Gulliver's stay in Lilliput. In attending the "political" ceremonies of Lilliput, Gulliver takes serious consideration of the ridiculous system of gaining political favor and power. Politicians perform "rope dances" in order to gain political rank. (Bk. I, ch. 3). Here Gulliver's being gullible is used as a political attack on the superficiality of politics. In both works, characters or narrators make understatement or treat absurd subjects with complete sincerity, thus creating a situation from which satirical observations may be drawn. Another way in which naivete is used in these two tales is to satirize the tendency of corrupt people to take advantage of overly trusting individuals. Both Gulliver and Candide fit the description of the overly trusting, naive character. Van Doren chronicles this situation as demonstrated in Gulliver's Travels: Grateful for the kindness shown on him, Gulliver aided the Lilliput in this war by capturing the Blefusudian fleet and bringing it as a gift to his royal host. But the Lilliputians were no more grateful than the English had been to the Oxford ministry for ending the war with France. . . . The sourest of the tiny ministers became Gulliver's enemy. (187) Here Gulliver too easily places his trust in the hands of strangers. This naive move leaves open the opportunity for the Lilliputians to betray him. Swift is able to satirically attack human's

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behavior through this “ situational irony” (Quintana 344-346). In this particular situation, Swift demonstrates how dangerous being overly trusting may be. Gulliver believes that he has made friends in the Lilliputians. However, by the end of the visit he is almost executed (Bk. I). On a satirical level, Swift asserts that the corruptive human being is deadly when overly trusted. The dangers of being overly trusting are also discussed in *Candide*. In chapter 19, *Candide* is taken advantage of by a conniving captain. *Candide*, who has just acquired great wealth from El Dorado, is overcharged for passage on a ship. Then he entrusts his possessions with the captain, who flees with *Candide*’s riches (ch. 19). Here Voltaire rejects an “ optimistic” (Maurois 100) approach to philosophy. The audience realizes that *Candide* has been swindled out of his belongings by confiding in a “ trustworthy” citizen of the “ best of all possible worlds” (Maurois 100). Again naivete is used to create satire, in this case, an individual’s overly trusting nature is wrongly taken advantage of and results in a loss of property or even a near death experience. Another aspect of society that is attacked in both of these novels is authority figures. In each case, Gulliver or *Candide*’s reactions to authority are used as satirical devices. In the case of *Candide*, positive progress is made after a period of naive subordination. In Gulliver’s case, the hierarchical structures of society keep him in constant submission. *Candide* at first blindly accepts his teacher’s highly optimistic philosophy. It takes *Candide* a while to begin to question this authority. Voltaire contends that authority figures should be questioned and their doctrine should not be taken at face value. Voltaire’s negative tone towards *Candide*’s naive following of Pangloss’ optimism is seen at aesthetic distance in the context

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of devastation after devastation that occurs. Pangloss' philosophy is obviously not holding up. This leads Candide to an evaluation of this authority. Pasco describes this intellectual growth that occurs after the questioning: when Candide says early in chapter 13 that had Pangloss lived, Candide would have dared to object to the master's continual insistence that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, we know something has taken place. This is the first of several indications that Candide has begun a process of development that will leave him considerably less naive. (94) Candide is able to become less naive and thus less subordinate. The same is unfortunately not true for Gulliver. He has been conditioned by a hierarchical society to internalize his submissive role. This internalization is apparent when he first encounters the Lilliputians, Gulliver states, " I answered in a few words, but in the most submissive manner" (36). The audience is to consider the drastic size difference between Gulliver and the Lilliputians. It is absurd for Gulliver the bow down to these microscopic islanders. Once this has been assessed, Swift's satirical attack on hierarchical structures is made clear; certain institutions foster a socially stratified culture, of which Gulliver is a product. Again his submissive nature emerges in his contact with the Houyhnhms. Lawler mentions Gulliver's position with the Houyhnhms when he notes, " the final realization that even as a servant and disciple there can be no place for him [Gulliver] in the land Houyhnhms" (323). In this land Gulliver readily takes his submissive role, as a result of his experience with hierarchical authority. In both novels, different satirical points are made about authority, but they are both done through the same medium of a naive character's reaction to authority. Finally, both works may be regarded as

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travel tales, which expose the naive characters to various perspectives. This allows the authors to satirize various aspects of human nature and universalizes the satire. Clark further describes Gulliver's role: Indeed it was never long before he [Gulliver] comprehended the inhabitants of the lands he chanced upon. In this respect he was a typical voyager. (2) In the "Introduction to Gulliver's Travels" this sentiment is also expressed. The author states that, "Swift adopts an ancient satirical device: the imaginary voyage" (905). Gulliver travels to far and unknown lands, and is presented with new perspectives that satirize lands very familiar to the reader. The world seen through his naive eyes can be interpreted as Swift's satire. Van Doren comments on the affect of these various perspectives, using Brobdingnag as an example: But after the giant, he [Gulliver] could not so easily return to the old scale. . . his own people seemed contemptible by their smallness. (189) And again by using Houyhnhm as an example: "The reasonable Houyhnhms said he had noticed the rudiments of all these human ways of life among the yahoos" (193). These alternate perspectives provide revelations for Gulliver about his society and human nature in general. As the naive traveler is enlightened, the reader recognizes the satirical significance of the situation (Quintana 344-346). Mylne similarly classifies Candide when she states, "Tories like Zadig and Candide were in the tradition of the voyage imaginaire and the Oriental travel-tale" (216). Candide's journey spans across many nations and both hemispheres. He is exposed to different philosophies and people. This allows the author to satirize different aspects of society. Candide is especially given a new perspective at El Dorado. In El Dorado, gold is treated like dirt. There is little

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value that these citizens place on material possessions. This episode acts as a satirical attack on the materialism of the world. In tune with the message of the final chapter, "we must cultivate our garden" (123), Bottiglia divides the many settings of the novel into gardens. He states that: Westphalia is the center of optimistic fatalism, Bulgares is a naked military despotism, while Paraguay is a military despotism masquerading as a kingdom of God on earth. Holland is a mercantile utopia . . . Lisbon is the home of Inquisitory fanaticism . . . Orellions is the habitat of state-of-nature savagery . . . [El Dorado] offers a philosophic ideal for human aspiration. (91) Here the scholar provides an extensive example of the many perspectives present and the ideals that are satirized. In each arena Candide's experiences and interaction with others are the breeding ground for Voltaire's satire. In both Candide and Gulliver's Travels this universal satire is made possible by the stories' being travel-tales in which the protagonists are exposed to many different lands and perspectives. As can be seen, child-like naivete can be a helpful tool in criticizing or satirizing a subject. When an amateur approaches a subject ignorant of the topic, his or her mistakes may be learning experiences for those observing. That is exactly the case with these two novels. As stated in the "Introduction to Gulliver's Travels", "Through Gulliver's eyes, we gaze on marvel after marvel" (906), and through these naive characters' experiences and satires are developed. Understatements are made of absurd incidents. This reveals the preposterous nature of the situation. The naive characters place too much trust in the hands of strangers. This vulnerability allows for the exploitative nature of humans to be exhibited. These characters' reactions to authority act as a medium to satirize authority

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figures and hierarchical structures. Finally, the travel aspect of these stories creates many perspectives from which universal topics of satire may be drawn. In this manner, naivete reveals truths about human nature. Works Cited