

Satire and irony by jonathan swift

Literature



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Satire and irony are the main literary tools used by Jonathan Swift in *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*. The author has used irony to create satire in making the audience see the deeper truths within the prevailing social, moral and political circumstances prevailing during the time. While making a comparison between *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*, one can see that the author has used satire, irony and satirical settings in highlighting the problems and contradictions present in society. The author also intends to make comments on such circumstances without intentionally addressing the reader for his response.

In both *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift has used irony and satire to achieve certain goals primarily because of the disparity in the structure of each work. There is a strong variance in the use of satire in *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*. *A Modest Proposal* is certainly a satire which aims at making people of that period to realize the patterns of cold and calculated callousness demonstrated by forthright rationalism in dealing with issues related to poverty and over population.

Swift's works fall under two kinds of satire; the formal and the indirect.

Formal satire is narrated in first person while indirect satire is in the form of the character appealing to the audience. *A Modest Proposal* is an indirect satire since the author speaks on behalf of a character who proposes to provide solutions to an audience that is primarily anonymous while addressing the political economy. The satire used by Swift in *A Modest Proposal* is aptly demonstrated by the following; I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and

wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout” (Swift, 1996). The irony in *A Modest Proposal* has been presented by the author mainly through characterization whereby the speaker makes the proposals.

For example the speaker in *A Modest Proposal* who is ironic is able to discuss coldly about the social and economic advantages of killing children and then eating them without a tinge or presence of any thought being given to the related moral problems. The irony exhibited by this character does reveal that he can just go on criticizing the moral weak points of mothers who undergo immoral acts such as abortions and committing infanticide.

In a dramatic and very ironic statement, one of the characters in *A Modest Proposal* balks at the prospect of eating teen-agers because it amounts to cruelty, which is in stark contrast to the other suggestions in it. The characters in *A Modest Proposal* use satire and irony in indirectly telling the readers to ignore the other options and ideas thus giving an example of being represented by the most terrible social planners and politicians. The character can make ironical statements in making them to appear perfectly economical without appearing to comprehend the appalling nature of the same.

For example, on one occasion the character talks about selling children as food, which is narrated in *A Modest Proposal* as “ I grant this food [children] will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children. ” Indeed this is a very powerful statement in being disguised as

being the meaning that conveys the philosophy of the speaker and in addressing the fact that the rich land owners of England and Ireland had taken away all that the poor inhabitants had.

Such ironic narrations in *A Modest Proposal* convey to the reader in a rather cold manner about how children's skin can be used in making ... "admirable gloves for ladies and summer boots for fine gentlemen". It appears quite normal and nothing extraordinary for the narrator to rattle out such ironical words in implying as if it was something very simple and beautiful. The inherent irony in *A Modest Proposal* does make the reader understand the dangers involved in blindly adhering to a single philosophy especially when the entire population is likely to be adversely influenced.

Verbal irony is the main figure of speech in *A Modest Proposal*, whereby the character says exactly the opposite of what he intends to mean. Swift has tactfully used such a device in making his arguments about the Irish people deserving improved conduct from the English, which is indeed extremely amusing and powerful. In pointing out that the Irish should not be ill treated as animals, Swift has written, "I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift has made the bureaucracy of England as the main target of irony and satire. *Gulliver's Travels* is primarily a work of satire. According to Rodino, "Gulliver is neither a fully developed character nor even an altogether distinguishable persona; rather, he is a satiric device enabling Swift to score satirical points" (Rodino, 1992). Sure the work begins with a lot of satire in attacking the different political machines.

Primarily, however, Gulliver's Travels is a work of satire. " Gulliver is neither a fully developed character nor even an altogether distinguishable persona; rather, he is a satiric device enabling Swift to score satirical points" (Rodino, 1992). Indeed, whereas the work begins with more specific satire, attacking perhaps one political machine or aimed at one particular custom in each instance, it finishes with " the most savage onslaught on humanity ever written," satirizing the whole of the human condition. Murry, 1972). During the time of Swift, the monarchy in England had lot of influence in most realms including law despite the increasing power of the bureaucracy. It is this aspect which has been made as the object of satire in Gulliver's Travels by way of the actions of the Lilliputians who take detailed stock of the possessions of Gulliver and in being prone to making official proclamations about the factors that governed the life of Gulliver along with that of the other citizens.

This is evident from what Gulliver remarks in an important quote from Gulliver's Travels, " I could not sufficiently wonder at the intrepidity of these diminutive mortals, who durst venture to mount and walk on my body, while one of my hands was at liberty, without trembling at the sight of prodigious creature as I must appear to them" (Swift, 1983). Such overpowering self importance is an example of the satire used by Jonathan Swift in Gulliver's Travels.

It can be seen that a small and unimportant matter can be transformed and made into a bureaucratic and political issue of great importance. The satire is also evident for example when there is a war between Blefuscu and Lilliput because the Emperor cut his finger with an egg shell and there was no

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consensus about the best way to break the egg. This is evident from the quote from the book, “ Whereupon the Emperor published an edict, commanding all his subjects, under great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs.

The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us there have been six rebellions raised on this account” (Swift, 1983). The war had specifically broken out between Blefuscu and Lilliput because the debate ended without any conclusion being arrived at in regard to interpreting which end of the egg was smaller. For the author of Gulliver’s Travels, Lilliput represents England while Blefuscu represents France. In narrating this story, Swift has satirized the aimless bickering and power struggle between the two countries.

The introduction of Lilliput in Gulliver’s Travels is indicative of an absurd and miniature England instead of a distant Utopia. In conveying the description of the government and the land it is made clear that despite the Lilliputians suffering from the same faults as present in the English society, they possessed several principles that allowed them to have a Utopian existence, particularly when its comparison was made with England. After Gulliver escapes from Lilliput he goes to England and returns back to sea after some time.

This time he lands in a strange land where he is the smaller one as compared to Lilliput but is alone in this world and when he does encounter the first inhabitants he gets scared, “ for as human creatures are observed to be more savage in proportion to their bulk” (Swift, 1983). This indicates that

Swift has used satire in attacking humanity for their ways. The satire in Gulliver's Travels reaches the pinnacle whereby " Swift put his most biting, hard lines, that speak against not only the government, but human nature itself" (Paij, 2009).

Using a great deal of irony, Swift makes Gulliver to come in contact with the Yahoos when he comments about a Yahoo, " My horror and astonishment are not to be described, when I observed in this abdominal animal a perfect human figure" (Swift, 1983). Gulliver ponders that the basic difference between him and the yahoo was the absence of clothes and cleanliness; otherwise the animal was no less than a human.

In making such narrations Swift achieved his goal in expressing the satire in showing that humans have overpowering flaws which ultimately lead to the degradation of man. He has used a satirical technique in Gulliver's Travels in order to attack modernity. He is seen as being concerned about the enhanced power of Europeans throughout the world, the nastiness of the privileged and the increasing importance of wealth for achieving happiness in life (Harold, 1986).

Swift took Gulliver on four voyages which made him have a larger understanding of the flaws in human nature. Gulliver's perceptions about humans and the world change and it is the change in his narrations that conveys the author's social commentary and satire. Gulliver's image of humans is not much influenced after the first voyage and so is the case for the second one. But his image of humans declines steadily by the end of the

fourth voyage when he comes across the Yahoos. It is in this way that Swift has presented his opinion about human conditions.