

Study Note

Jonathan Swift's Satire and Irony

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Perhaps, each one of us is a satirist in a certain way. Each one of us bemoans the wickedness and wrongs in the society and from age to age the sting of the scornful satire on man, has been interpreted in different ways. The real satirist, however, expresses his wit in writing. The real satirist attacks the wickedness by laughing at it.

Among the great English satirists of the early 18th century, Jonathan Swift is far more remarkable. Born and educated in Ireland, Swift spent his early life in England. As a young man he felt resentment and bitterness towards the state of things in the English society. He took a degree of Master of Arts when he was in England, a degree that qualified him for church. Dissatisfied with his employment he returned to Ireland. There he opened his career as a writer with *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Battle of the Books*. These were followed by other grimly ironical publications, pamphlets and essays on religion and war, on political situation in England and Ireland.

In this paper the beginning of his career as a prose writer will be introduced, followed by a presentation on his satire and irony in *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Tale of a Tub*. *Gulliver's travels*, which has been the subject of great debate among historians and literary critics, is an open political satire. It is directed against scientists, and it offers some of Swift's fiery attacks on the acts performed by his country fellows. The book was published anonymously and became an instantaneous success. *A Tale of a Tub* reveals the peculiar position occupied by Swift in the early 18th century English literature in which his penetrating looks were not deceived by the optimistic picture of reality, which philosophers, moralists and writers were trying to build up and substantiate. Swift lays bare with clarity the close connection between religion, church and politics when he describes the history of the three churches, laying emphasis on their being used as efficient instruments by ruling classes for preservation and consolidation of their power.

Jonathan Swift's satire is inspired by what seems to be a general hatred of mankind. He was, nevertheless known for his kindness and unselfish work for the poor. His indignation was equaled by his wit. He told most ridiculous stories and made the most outrageous jokes while appearing serious.

Swift was born in Dublin from English parents and was educated in Ireland and England. While he was a student at Trinity College in Dublin, he was more interested in poetry than other subjects and he distinguished himself by failing in two or three subjects taken up for his degree of Bachelor of Arts. Eventually he managed to obtain it, only by a humiliating "special grace". He worked near London at Moor Park, however the bitterness he felt because of his subordinate position drove him back to Ireland. Unable to find a job there, he returned to England and during the four years of staying at Moor Park, he met many political men. After taking his degree at Oxford, Swift did not do much for his advancement. He returned to Ireland only to go back again to Moor Park. His going back and forth, meeting many people and situation stood for the source for his books.

This period, namely the ending of the decade, is a period of great importance for it is now that he began to publish, at first poems, although of not remarkable quality. However, his vein suddenly changed and he published two works, *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of Books*, which opened his career as a prose writer.

The Tale of a Tub is perhaps the most flawless satire in English literature. It is directed against religion, as represented in England, by the Roman Catholic Church, the English Church and the Puritan Dissenting Church and it is written in the form of an allegorical tale.

The story says that there was a man who had three sons. He bequeathed on each of them a new coat and advised them to take care and preserve them unaltered. These three sons, Peter, Martin and Jack standing respectively for the Roman, Anglican and Dissenting Churches went to town to seek their fortunes and fell in love with three ladies: Duchess d'Argent (covetousness), Madam de Grands Titres (ambition) and Countess d'Orgueil (pride). The sons soon began to violate their father's will by covering their coats with shoulder-knots. They locked up their father will in a box and refused to know about it. And with every change of fashion, they added new ornaments to their coats: bars of gold lace, flamed-coloured satin ornament - the fire of purgatory -, silver fringes - habits of grandour-, figured embroidery- saints. Some time later, Martin began to insist on being addressed by his brothers as Mr. Peter, Father Peter and Finally My Lord Peter. Martin and Jack revolted and broke with him taking away a copy of their father's will. When they opened and read the will they understood that they had committed the sin of not listening of their father. They began to reform their coats by giving up the embellishments, and so Martin proceeded with Moderation while Jack rent it up from top to bottom. The story's purport is to ridicule Popery and Dissent. Swift was in clergy. He had entered Church and was the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and so he could not rise openly against religion, however the irony and disdain with which he speaks about rites, the doctrine and the corruption and hypocrisy of the priests leave no doubts as to his real attitude towards religion. The satire upon dress and fashion was mainly aimed at the

aristocracy. The satire is supported by a brilliant allegory of the idol - the tailor- and its worship - fashion-. This introduces a witty theory of the universe being a large suit of clothes that invests everything. It is a comparison of man with a micro~coat and a bitter reflection upon what his moral make~up was.

Swift speaks unequivocally of religion as a vision which man builds up in his mind "when fancy gets astride on his reason". When common sense is kicked out. The prime mover in understanding the meaning of God and devil originated in the mind of the primitive man.

A Tale of a Tub reveals the peculiar position occupied by Swift in the early eighteenth century English literature in which a conforming tendency prevailed. Swift presented his ideas as those not deceived by the optimistic picture of reality, which philosophers and moralists were trying to build and substantiate. He stripped man of the halo with which he had been invested and presented him to the world in all his nakedness. To Swift the state of happiness had nothing to do with the state of being virtuous. Happiness was, to him a "perpetual possession of being well deceived" which means that, that was an illusion. To him, man had to be blind to reality in order that he might be happy.

Swift lays bare with clarity the close connection between religion, church and politics when he describes the history of the three churches, laying emphasis on their being used as efficient instruments by the ruling classes for the consolidation of their power. He is moved by a profound hostility against feudalism, which rested as much on the church as on the aristocracy. He saw in the religious enthusiasm and zeal a violation of reason and common sense.

The very title of his book is symbolical, for Swift casts his story of the three churches in the form of allegory. "A Tale of a Tub" implies the chaotic structure of his satire in which the narrative is interrupted by long digressions. On the other hand, it has a deep significance. Like any other allegory *A Tale of a Tub*, is based on personification that is on the embodiment of ideas in human beings. It differs, though from other allegories by the achievement of a great number of concrete details. The story is also told in matter~of~fact terms of everyday life. The scene is laid in London and the tale abounds in all sorts of references to town life.

A Tale of a Tub shows Swift as the greatest ironist of English letters. Sometimes bitter, but more than often biting and lashing, irony is the chief form assumed to his humour, and at the same time a stylistic device widely used throughout the book. The style of the book posses already all the qualities by which it will be distinguished in his major work, *Gulliver's Travels*. It is plain, clear and precise.

The idea of *Gulliver's Travels* on which Swift's literary fame chiefly rests, seems to have originated in the days of the "Scriblerus Club" but took no definite shape till after 1720.

Swift was indebted for the form of his masterpiece to two sources:

1. The same travel books that had been assimilated by Defoe and
2. The fantastic fiction of a realistic character that had been long existed in the world of literature: Rabelais's *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage a la Lune* and *Histoire comique des Etats~empires du Soleil* etc.

Gulliver's Travels has always enjoyed an extraordinary popularity with children, who have been fascinated with the wonderful things observed and brought about by Gulliver in the fantastic countries he visits. To the grown ~up reader, especially to the reader who has enough knowledge of the eighteenth~century England, Swift's novel reveals its phenomenal richness of ideas and real intent. The peoples and the countries described in it, however imaginary they may seem, are as many magic mirrors the author held to the English society of his day. It is without doubt one of the most powerful attacks ever made against man's wickedness and stupidity.

Gulliver's voyage to Lilliput, in the first part of the book, takes us to the land of pygmies, a land that bears a striking resemblance to England. Lilliput is a miniature empire with a little monarch who entitled himself as "delight and terror of the universe". Swift describes the life and customs of the Lilliputian court, highly remindful of the picture he had seen in London. For instance, we recognize the intrigues by means of which favours and promotions were obtained at Ann's court. This, says Swift,

"when a great office is vacant either by death or disgrace (which often happens), five or six of those candidates petition the emperor to entertain his Majesty and the Court with a dance on the rope, and whoever jumps the highest without falling succeeds in the office. Very often the chief Ministers themselves are commanded to show their skill and to convince the Emperor that they have not lost their faculty."⁽¹⁾

The blue, red, and green silken threads which the Emperor awards as a peculiar mark of his favour (the Orders of Thistle, of the Bath and of the Garter) are won by leaping over a stick which he holds with both ends parallel to the horizon or by creeping under it backward and forward several times.

Swift no longer cherished any illusions concerning the Wig and the Tory Parties, which are so thinly disguised in his satirical characterization of the two Lilliputian factions, the Tramecksan and the Slamecksan. He had become fully aware that there was no essential difference between them and that actually, both of them were driven by the same selfish interests.

Swift ridicules the religious conflict over matters of rites and doctrine between Protestants and Roman Catholics, which had caused so many wars. This is illustrated when Gulliver learns about

the obstinate war in which Lilliput and Blefuscu (France) have been commenced for a great number of years because of a different way of breaking eggs, at the large or at the small end.

It is in the instance of this ad absurdum of all the objects towards which they are directed that the greatest quality of Swift's satire and irony lies. He always finds such symbolical reflections and terms to bestow his characterizations in, that the core of the matter is brilliantly brought out and the absurdity of doctrine or state of things aimed at, becomes obvious beyond contradiction.

There are many other allusions to the social and political life of England. For instance, the ministers of the Emperor of Lilliput are satirical portraits of the politicians of Swift's time. Thus, Flimnap, the Lord High Treasure, is meant for Robert Walpole. Gulliver himself might be identified with the author, while Skyresh Bolgolam stands for Nottingham. The description of the Emperor, the Court and the Ministers of Lilliput give a realistic picture of English political life under George I, a picture which, although seen through a telescope, loses none of its essential features: the corruption of the ministers, the Court intrigues and favoritism, the squabbles of the Wigs and the Tories over trifling differences in policy, the demagogy of the religious slogans and many others.

The second part, which describes Gulliver's travels to Brobdingnag, the country of Giants, differs greatly in character from the first. At the time when it was written, Swift was trying to find a positive way out of the world of the pygmies, of the contradictions inherent in the aristocratic world. Yet, he cannot be said to have put forward an actual social ideal in the peaceful patriarchal state of an agricultural type, which Gulliver finds in Brobdingnag.

For though the king of this country is a wise and good monarch, Swift cannot be considered an adept of the theory of enlightened absolutism. His attitude towards monarchs, as demonstrated particularly by the last two parts of the book, is on the whole negative. Brobdingnag indicates, indeed, certain positive features that were attractive for Swift in many ways. It is the country of hard working and prosperous farmers and artisans. The king that rules is an enemy of wars. He shudders at the idea to start using guns. Swift introduced this episode with the view to express his hatred of the wars with which England and Europe had been so long afflicted and which he had already condemned in some of his pamphlets. Yet, the country of the giants is not an ideal country, as it is shown by the presence of beggars in the town. The description of the manners and customs of the Brobdingnagians occasions less satirical allusions to the English society than that of Lilliput.. However, when Gulliver is asked by the king to give an account of the state of Europe, he draws with caustic irony an idealized picture of the English social and political institutions.

Part Three, *A Voyage to Laputa* is without doubt directed against the scientists and philosophers of his own age. The activities of those in the Academy of Lagado, which is a caricature of the Royal Society, reminds us of the doubtful value of much of what passes as science.

It also invites attention on Swift's attack on the medical profession. Through *Laputa* Swift brings us many varied treasures including one of the most humorous paragraphs present in *Gulliver's Travels*:

He had been eight years upon a project for extracting sunbeams out of cucumbers, which were to be put into vials hermetically sealed, and let out to warm the air in raw inclement summers. He told me, he did not doubt in eight years more, that he should be able to supply the Governor's gardens with sunshine at a reasonable rate; but he complained that his stock was low, and entreated me to give him something as an encouragement to ingenuity, especially since this had been a very dear season for cucumbers.⁽²⁾

But it is part Four *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* that has been regarded as a corrective satire on human nature itself.

The character of Gulliver is that of a patriotic Englishman, decent and practical but at the same time stupid and gullible (as his name suggests). Wherever Gulliver goes, he is always eager to show his devotion to his country and benefits of civilization to other less enlightened peoples. In the fourth voyage, the land of Houyhnhnms, a highly civilized race of horses who keep their savage and filthy domestic animals called Yahoos, which bear strange resemblances to human beings, he is surprised at his host's ignorance of the art of war as practiced in "civilized countries"

I could not forbear shaking my head and smiling a little at his ignorance. And, being no stranger to the art of war, I gave him a description of cannon, culverins, muskets, carbines, pistols, bullets, powder, swords, bayonets, battles, sieges, retreats, attacks, undermines, countermines, bombardments, sea-fights; ships sunk with a thousand men, twenty thousand killed on each side; dying groans, limbs in the air; smoke, noise, confusion, trampling to death under horses' feet....⁽³⁾

Without doubt, the Houyhnhnms were horrified that 'a creature pretending to reason could be capable of such enormities,' however Gulliver continues to describe the glories of European civilizations and to offer help to the astonished Houyhnhnms.

Moreover, Gulliver as an Englishman feels that it is his duty to colonise the lands he visited, however,

But, as those countries which I have described do not appear to have any desire of being

conquered and enslaved, murdered, or driven out by colonies; nor bound either in gold, silver, sugar, or tobacco; I did humbly conceive they were by no means proper objects of our zeal, our valour, or our interest.⁽⁴⁾

Conclusion

Ironically *Gulliver's Travels* a book thought by most people as a charming book of adventure popular with children, is one of the most powerful attacks ever made against man's wickedness and stupidity. Swift's book is full of personal, literary and political allusions. The modern reader might wonder sometimes at certain references that had a special meaning during Swift's time. Some of them are explained in the Notes, others require comment in case one is not familiar with the situation of the political life in England and Ireland during Swift's time. The interpretations also change with time, as well. Nevertheless, there is always something new to learn, something in which, one can see the ridicule and laugh at it.

We can consider Swift as a satirist, perhaps one of the greatest satirists to have written in English language.

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Works cited

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2. Swift, pp.223-224
3. Swift, p.294
4. Swift, p.344