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Introduction

Jonathan Swift, one of the foremost prose satirist in the English language, was also a reputed political pamphleteer, essayist, poet and cleric. Born in Ireland, he lost his father early on in life and was mostly brought up by his uncle. However, with the advent of the Glorious Revolution in Ireland, he was forced to move to England, where he secured employment under Sir William Temple. Here he got a taste of high living and power play. As a young man he often travelled back and forth between Ireland and England. Later, he entered the Church of Ireland, which at that time was a poor cousin of the Church of England. To secure the rights of his church, he began to write pamphlets and finally entered the political arena. However, his political ambition was not long lived and he returned to England for a short period. Soon he was back to Ireland where he became the Dean of St. Patrick Cathedral, a position he held until his death. As a writer, most of his works were written under pseudonyms. Today, he is best remembered for his prose

satire, 'Gulliver's Travel.'

Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift (30 November 1667 – 19 October 1745) was an Anglo-Irish^[1] satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer (first for the Whigs, then for the Tories), poet and cleric who became Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

Swift is remembered for works such as *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1712), *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729). He is regarded by the *Encyclopædia Britannica* as the foremost prose satirist in the English language, and is less well known for his poetry. He originally published all of his works under pseudonyms – such as Lemuel Gulliver, Isaac Bickerstaff, M. B. Drapier – or anonymously. He was a master of two styles of satire, the Horatian and Juvenalian styles.

His deadpan, ironic writing style, particularly in *A Modest Proposal*, has led to such satire being subsequently termed "Swiftian".

Early life and education

Swift's father, Jonathan Swift the elder, was an Englishman who had settled in Ireland after the Stuart Restoration (1660) and become steward of the King's Inns, Dublin. In 1664 he married Abigail Erick, who was the daughter of an English clergyman. In the spring of 1667 Jonathan the elder died suddenly, leaving his wife, baby daughter, and an unborn son to the care of his brothers. The younger Jonathan Swift thus grew up fatherless and dependent on the generosity of his uncles. His education was not neglected, however, and at the age of six he was sent to Kilkenny School, then the best in Ireland. In 1682 he entered Trinity College, Dublin, where he was granted his bachelor of arts degree in February 1686 *speciali gratia* ("by special favour"), his degree being a device often used when a student's record failed, in some minor respect, to conform to the regulations.

Swift continued in residence at Trinity College as a candidate for his master of arts degree until February 1689. But the Roman Catholic disorders that had begun to spread through Dublin after the Glorious Revolution (1688–89) in Protestant England caused Swift to seek security in England, and he soon became a member of the household of a

distant relative of his mother named Sir William Temple, at Moor Park, Surrey. Swift was to remain at Moor Park intermittently until Temple's death in 1699.

Years at moor park

Temple was engaged in writing his memoirs and preparing some of his essays for publication, and he had Swift act as a kind of secretary. During his residence at Moor Park, Swift twice returned to Ireland, and during the second of these visits, he took orders in the Anglican church, being ordained priest in January 1695. At the end of the same month he was appointed vicar of Kilroot, near Belfast. Swift came to intellectual maturity at Moor Park, with Temple's rich library at his disposal. Here, too, he met Esther Johnson (the future Stella), the daughter of Temple's widowed housekeeper. In 1692, through Temple's good offices, Swift received the degree of M.A. at the University of Oxford.

Between 1691 and 1694 Swift wrote a number of poems, notably six odes. But his true genius did not find expression until he turned from verse to prose satire and composed, mostly at Moor Park between 1696 and 1699, *A Tale of a Tub*, one of his major works. Published anonymously in 1704, this work was made up of three associated pieces: the Tale itself, a satire against "the numerous and gross corruptions in religion and learning"; the mock-heroic "Battle of the Books"; and the "Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit," which ridiculed the manner of worship and preaching of religious enthusiasts at that period. In the "Battle of the Books," Swift supports the ancients in the longstanding dispute about the relative merits of ancient versus modern literature and culture. But *A Tale of a Tub* is the most impressive of the three compositions. This work is outstanding for its exuberance of satiric wit and energy and is marked by an incomparable command of stylistic effects, largely in the nature of parody. Swift saw the realm of culture and literature threatened by zealous pedantry, while religion—which for him meant rational Anglicanism—suffered attack from both Roman Catholicism and the Nonconformist (Dissenting) churches. In the Tale he proceeded to trace all these dangers to a single source: the irrationalities that disturb man's highest faculties—reason and common sense.

Career, political journalist, churchman

After Temple's death in 1699, Swift returned to Dublin as chaplain and secretary to the earl of Berkeley, who was then going to Ireland as a lord justice. During the ensuing years

he was in England on some four occasions—in 1701, 1702, 1703, and 1707 to 1709—and won wide recognition in London for his intelligence and his wit as a writer. He had resigned his position as vicar of Kilroot, but early in 1700 he was preferred to several posts in the Irish church. His public writings of this period show that he kept in close touch with affairs in both Ireland and England. Among them is the essay “Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome,” in which Swift defended the English constitutional balance of power between the monarchy and the two houses of Parliament as a bulwark against tyranny. In London he became increasingly well known through several works: his religious and political essays; *A Tale of a Tub*; and certain impish works, including the “Bickerstaff” pamphlets of 1708–09, which put an end to the career of John Partridge, a popular astrologer, by first prophesying his death and then describing it in circumstantial detail. Like all Swift’s satirical works, these pamphlets were published anonymously and were exercises in impersonation. Their supposed author was “Isaac Bickerstaff.” For many of the first readers, the very authorship of the satires was a matter for puzzle and speculation. Swift’s works brought him to the attention of a circle of Whig writers led by Joseph Addison, but Swift was uneasy about many policies of the Whig administration. He was a Whig by birth, education, and political principle, but he was also passionately loyal to the Anglican church, and he came to view with apprehension the Whigs’ growing determination to yield ground to the Nonconformists. He also frequently mimicked and mocked the proponents of “free thinking”: intellectual skeptics who questioned Anglican orthodoxy. A brilliant and still-perplexing example of this is *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708).

A momentous period began for Swift when in 1710 he once again found himself in London. A Tory ministry headed by Robert Harley (later earl of Oxford) and Henry St. John (later Viscount Bolingbroke) was replacing that of the Whigs. The new administration, bent on bringing hostilities with France to a conclusion, was also assuming a more protective attitude toward the Church of England. Swift’s reactions to such a rapidly changing world are vividly recorded in his *Journal to Stella*, a series of letters written between his arrival in England in 1710 and 1713, which he addressed to Esther Johnson and her companion, Rebecca Dingley, who were now living in Dublin. The astute Harley made overtures to Swift and won him over to the Tories. But Swift did not thereby renounce his essentially Whiggish convictions regarding the nature of government. The old Tory theory of the divine right of kings had no claim upon him. The ultimate power, he insisted, derived from the people as a whole and, in the English constitution, had come to be exercised jointly by king, lords, and commons.

Swift quickly became the Tories' chief pamphleteer and political writer and, by the end of October 1710, had taken over the Tory journal, *The Examiner*, which he continued to edit until June 14, 1711. He then began preparing a pamphlet in support of the Tory drive for peace with France. This, *The Conduct of the Allies*, appeared on Nov. 27, 1711, some weeks before the motion in favour of a peace was finally carried in Parliament. Swift was rewarded for his services in April 1713 with his appointment as dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.

Last years

The closing years of Swift's life have been the subject of some misrepresentation, and stories have been told of his ungovernable temper and lack of self-control. It has been suggested that he was insane. From youth he had suffered from what is now known to have been Ménière's disease, an affliction of the semicircular canals of the ears, causing periods of dizziness and nausea. But his mental powers were in no way affected, and he remained active throughout most of the 1730s—Dublin's foremost citizen and Ireland's great patriot dean. In the autumn of 1739 a great celebration was held in his honour. He had, however, begun to fail physically and later suffered a paralytic stroke, with subsequent aphasia. In 1742 he was declared incapable of caring for himself, and guardians were appointed. After his death in 1745, he was buried in St. Patrick's Cathedral. On his memorial tablet is an epitaph of his own composition, which says that he lies "where savage indignation can no longer tear his heart."

Legacy

Swift's intellectual roots lay in the rationalism that was characteristic of late 17th-century England. This rationalism, with its strong moral sense, its emphasis on common sense, and its distrust of emotionalism, gave him the standards by which he appraised human conduct. At the same time, however, he provided a unique description of reason's weakness and of its use by men and women to delude themselves. His moral principles are scarcely original; his originality lies rather in the quality of his satiric imagination and his literary art. Swift's literary tone varies from the humorous to the savage, but each of his satiric compositions is marked by concentrated power and directness of impact. His command of a great variety of prose styles is unerring, as is his power of inventing imaginary episodes and all their accompanying details. Swift rarely speaks in his own person; almost always he states his views by ironic indiscretion through some imagined

character like Lemuel Gulliver or the morally obtuse citizen of “A Modest Proposal.” Thus Swift’s descriptive passages reflect the minds that are describing just as much as the things described. Pulling in different directions, this irony creates the tensions that are characteristic of Swift’s best work, and reflects his vision of humanity’s ambiguous position between bestiality and reasonableness.

Conclusion

Jonathan Swift was a complex and fascinating figure. He was a conservative cleric with authoritarian views who rarely smiled or laughed and who cultivated an austere and patriarchal public persona. But he was also a rebel admired and loathed in equal measure for the “fury and sardonic bleakness” of his vision.

I read Gulliver's Travels as a child. I really liked him, like all his work.

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