



Metaphorical Inflation of satire in order to raise the level of moral concern in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*

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Abstract

According to Abrams, "satire is a literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation". Therefore the subject of a satire is diminished or derogated by the satirist in order to create an atmosphere of concern and contempt towards the particular subject. Thus the satirist works at two levels; at one level he or she portrays the subject in a poor and degraded manner whereas at the other level the satirist creates an atmosphere where the people reading the satire show great moral concern for the effects that arise due to the degradation and derogation of the specific subject. The subject of the satirist can range from a particular person to a particular group of people; for example Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock* in order to satirise the British upper class. Similarly satirists may satirise the moral decadence of society or mankind like Jonathan Swift does in *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*. Jonathan Swift has also used a similar technique of projecting his subject in a ridiculous and derogatory manner. Therefore Swift tries to portray his subjects as extremely evil in order to elicit a response of horror, indignation and concern from his readers. Thus Swift satirises mankind and human beings by depicting the Yahoos and the Brobdingnagian women and he satirises the concept of 'reason' by depicting the Laputans in *Gulliver's Travels*. Similarly Swift satirises reason and mankind's values based on materialism. The objective of the present article is to discuss the satirical elements in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*.

Keywords: satire, manner, tradition, mankind, society

Introduction

Jonathan Swift projects the decadence of human beings by satirising the Yahoos in book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*. In order to invoke the concern of the people towards this decadence Swift has depicted the Yahoos to be the ultimate embodiments of evil. Therefore Swift does not destroyed evil in his satire but he has shown the triumph of evil over everything else. Actually the Yahoo is just a metaphorical reflection of humans and its evil characteristics are exaggerations of the bad and decadent nature of humans. Thus Swift creates several situations in his novel where he exaggerates the evilness of the humans by depicting the Yahoos in a most dirty and filthy manner. One such situation is created by Swift in book IV, *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*, chapter 7, where he has described the leader of a herd of Yahoos to be physically deformed, mischievous in nature. This leader likes to employ a subordinate who licks the leader's feet and posterior and supplies him with female Yahoos for sexual enjoyment. For his services, the subordinate is awarded a piece of ass' flesh regularly, he is disliked by most of the Yahoos and therefore he keeps close to the leader for safety. By depicting such a filthy situation among the Yahoos, Swift has created a feeling of revulsion among the readers for the Yahoos. But Swift will only succeed as a satirist if he is succinctly able to show that the moral decadence of the Yahoos is actually an exaggerated version of the evil prevalent in humans and Swift achieves this aim by stating at the end that the evil behaviour of corrupt leaders and followers among the Yahoos is similar to that of ministers and

courtiers among humans. Thus we can easily infer that ministers and courtiers among humans are not physically deformed or the subordinates of these leaders do not actually lick their posteriors and feet but Swift depicts such exaggerations among the Yahoos because a satirist does not minimise the situation he or she deals with but tries to make it as contemptuous as possible. It is only through the triumph of evil that people will be able to see a clear image of the damage that is done to mankind. According to Pinkus, "...the point of satire is to make the reader aware of the evil within the satiric target. Therefore the satirist does not diminish his target; he expands it into a grotesque. The whole movement of satire is designed to create this effect" (Pinkus cited in Gravid) [2]. Furthermore Swift has satirised the political system of the humans in the first book *A Voyage to Lilliput*, chapter 3 by depicting a rope dance performed by courtiers, ministers and people of high birth in Lilliput in order to entertain the King. The rope dance is also done by candidates aspiring for the post of a minister or courtier. Similarly Flimnap, the treasurer of Lilliput, is "allowed to cut a Caper on the strait Rope, at least an inch higher than any other Lord in the whole Empire" [3]. By depicting the rope dance Swift is trying to satirise the tactics of appeasement adopted by ministers who aspire to get a political office. In reality these aspirant ministers would never actually dance like those depicted in the novel but Swift has to exaggerate their antics of flattery in order to arouse the attention of the people towards such behaviour. Similarly according to critics like J.A. Downie, the character of Flimnap is compared to Robert Walpole because Flimnap is shown to

be the treasurer of Lilliput and Walpole was also the prime minister and chief treasurer of England during the time this book was written ^[4]. But Swift has not delved deep into developing Flimnap's characterisation although the identification is readily made. Swift has done this because he may have been scared of incurring the wrath of Walpole and facing arrest for making fun of a high ranking government functionary. Moreover we should not forget that Swift could not get any high ranking post of a dean or bishop in various churches in England because he had angered Queen Anne by writing *A Tale of a Tub*. Queen Anne thought that Swift had abused the Christian religion in the book and had satirised the Church of England, of which she was a huge supporter. Thus it is not necessary that a satirist may always openly state that he or she is satirising a particular person or condition because he or she may be scared of offending and angering certain volatile and powerful segments of a society. Therefore it becomes all the more important for the satirist to portray the subject in an excessively derogatory fashion and exaggerate its bad qualities in order to avoid any form of direct comparison between real life persons, situations and incidents with their literary counterparts. Thus by arousing the concern of the people towards grave and serious matters and not offending the entities that are satirised, a satirist succeeds in his or her endeavour of writing a satire without getting into serious trouble, although this may not be the case with every satire, especially those written in the modern times.

Furthermore Swift attacked the prevalent societal trends through his novels and essays. He satirised the growing influence of 'reason' in the English society by writing the essay, *A Modest Proposal*. Swift was always obsessed with the concept of 'reason'. Being a churchman himself, Swift was pained to see that people treated reason to be an outcome of the scientific pursuits of mankind, reason was regarded to be a tool through which humans could build a better world and gather more knowledge about the world. But Swift felt that 'the ability to reason' was a gift given by God to man and man had to use his or her reason according to the principals dictated by God (church). According to Pinkus, Swift was against "the conception of reason as a means for reaching certainty, as the touchstone of truth, a reason that will accept no limits..." (Pinkus cited in Gravid) ^[5]. Thus Swift did not like the use of reason only to attain materialistic gains because he felt that man was inherently weak and was attracted towards vices and passions. Therefore man could use his or her reason for attaining their own selfish ends.

In *A Modest Proposal*, Swift has dealt with a situation where a world built on rationalism and materialistic reason has turned into a nightmare. He deals with the problem of raising children of poor people in Ireland in *A Modest Proposal*. Swift satirises the prevailing system of reasoning based on materialistic gains by suggesting that these children should be eaten alive. Like a member of the Royal Society, who backs up his arguments with facts and figures when he states that an American friend told him that a young healthy child nursed for a year would yield delicious and tender meat. Swift has written this essay in the form of a political pamphlet in order to mock various political parties that published such kind of political pamphlets, containing several ideas based upon 'reason' for purging England of several problems. Swift has

exaggerated the content given these pamphlets in order to prove that the society lost compassion and humanity and was only interested in making profit and money even if it is at the cost of human life. Swift also satirises the unjust system of serfdom in England, where the landlords made the peasants work hard in the fields and did not pay them enough in return for their hard work. He proves this point by stating that the meat of the poor children will be "very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children" ^[6]. Swift has to exaggerate the wickedness and meanness of the landlords by using a word like 'devour' because it is only by portraying the subject in a derogatory manner and creating an atmosphere of despair that he can arouse concern in the people for the pathetic state of affairs in Ireland.

To conclude, sometimes satirists like showing their subjects in a poor light because of some form of personal animosity with them. It is a well-known fact that Swift disliked Walpole and his policies. This is a reason why he chose to compare Walpole with Flimnap in *Gulliver's Travels*. Sometimes satirists have a deep rooted hatred for a particular regime or ideology and therefore they try to hit it by writing a satire. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is regarded to be a satire on the Soviet Union, even though his novel deals with an uprising of animals in a farm, Orwell succeeds in portraying Soviet leaders like Stalin in the form of animals in his novel. Thus Orwell diminishes his subjects by portraying them in the form of animals. Therefore satirists have to portray their subjects in a derogatory manner in order to create an atmosphere of exaggeration. People only react when they see or read a piece of literary work when ordinary people and conditions are projected in an exaggerated manner.

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