

THE ARTISTIC FUNCTION OF SATIRE AND DARK HUMOR IN THE WORKS
OF JONATHAN SWIFT

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the artistic function of satire and dark humor in Jonathan Swift's works, focusing primarily on *A Modest Proposal* and supplemented by *Gulliver's Travels*. Satire is a literary device used to expose social injustice, human folly, and institutional corruption, while dark humor intensifies the ethical and emotional impact of such critique. The study investigates Swift's use of irony, parody, grotesque exaggeration, and narrative strategies to engage readers morally and intellectually. Special emphasis is placed on how *A Modest Proposal* employs shocking humor to criticize British colonial policies in Ireland and how *Gulliver's Travels* uses fictional societies to reflect human weaknesses and societal absurdities. The paper concludes that Swift's satire and dark humor remain relevant in contemporary literary scholarship due to their enduring capacity to provoke ethical reflection and critical thought.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift, satire, dark humor, irony, grotesque, parody, social critique, *A Modest Proposal*, *Gulliver's Travels*, eighteenth-century literature.

INTRODUCTION

Satire has historically functioned as a powerful literary mechanism for critiquing societal norms, revealing hypocrisy, and challenging authority. Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), a leading satirist of the eighteenth century, employed sharp irony, grotesque exaggeration, and dark humor to illuminate human irrationality and societal corruption. Unlike simple comedic writing, Swift's satire combines amusement with moral reflection, compelling readers to confront ethical and social dilemmas.

Dark humor in Swift's texts operates as an artistic strategy that amplifies the emotional and cognitive impact of satire. In *A Modest Proposal*, the suggestion of consuming children to address poverty shocks the reader, forcing a confrontation with colonial exploitation and social indifference. Similarly, *Gulliver's Travels* presents fictional societies that satirize European politics and human arrogance, highlighting human pride, folly, and institutional weaknesses. These techniques demonstrate that Swift's satire is simultaneously entertaining, morally provocative, and intellectually engaging.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how satire and dark humor function artistically in Swift's major works, evaluating both their aesthetic and ethical significance. The research aims to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Swift's literary techniques for understanding human behavior, social critique, and ethical reasoning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Swift's satire has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Griffin (1994) emphasizes the dual function of satire as both a literary and moral instrument, noting that Swift's texts combine humor with ethical critique. Bloom (2003) underscores the enduring relevance of



Swift's works, highlighting their use of grotesque exaggeration and dark humor to address societal issues. Rawson (2010) explores Swift's engagement with contemporary political and social problems, arguing that his literary strategies remain models for modern ethical critique. Earlier works, such as Abrams (1999), provide foundational definitions of satire, irony, and parody, which are essential for understanding Swift's techniques. Orwell (1946) situates *Gulliver's Travels* within a broader discussion of literature's political functions, emphasizing its satirical critique of institutional power. Collectively, these sources establish a framework for analyzing Swift's integration of artistic and ethical concerns in his satire.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Swift's satire operates through multiple literary strategies:

1. Irony – the disparity between appearance and reality creates critical tension.
2. Grotesque exaggeration – exaggerating social issues to highlight absurdity.
3. Parody – imitation of social, political, and literary conventions to reveal flaws.
4. Dark humor – combining amusement with disturbing scenarios to provoke ethical reflection.

Eighteenth-century English literature provides the historical and cultural context for these strategies. Satire was a dominant literary form used to engage with political, social, and moral issues. Swift's works exemplify how satire can function simultaneously as entertainment and as a vehicle for social critique (Griffin, 1994; Bloom, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a combination of qualitative research methods:

1. Textual analysis – close reading of *A Modest Proposal* and key passages from *Gulliver's Travels* to identify satirical and humorous devices.
2. Comparative analysis – contrasting techniques used in the two works.
3. Thematic analysis – examining recurring motifs such as injustice, human folly, and moral critique.
4. Contextual approach – situating the works within eighteenth-century political, social, and cultural realities.
5. Critical interpretation -evaluating the aesthetic, ethical, and social impact of Swift's satire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Modest Proposal

The grotesque exaggeration in *A Modest Proposal* generates shock and moral reflection. Swift's suggestion of consuming Irish children critiques British colonial policies and societal indifference. Dark humor intensifies the ethical weight of satire, compelling readers to consider



moral responsibility and social injustice. Irony and parody further highlight the absurdity of contemporary political arguments regarding poverty and governance.

Gulliver's Travels

In Gulliver's Travels, Swift employs fictional societies to reflect human weaknesses and social absurdities. Lilliput and Brobdingnag serve as allegories of political arrogance and institutional corruption. Humor is subtler than in A Modest Proposal, yet grotesque imagery and parody still create meaningful social critique. The text encourages reflection on human behavior, rationality, and morality.

Comparative Analysis

While A Modest Proposal utilizes concentrated shock to provoke ethical reflection, Gulliver's Travels provides a broader, allegorical critique of society and human nature. Both works demonstrate Swift's mastery of satire and dark humor as literary strategies to engage readers emotionally, morally, and intellectually.

CONCLUSION

Jonathan Swift's works illustrate the artistic function of satire and dark humor as tools for social critique and moral reflection. A Modest Proposal employs grotesque exaggeration and shocking scenarios to critique British colonial policies, while Gulliver's Travels uses allegorical societies to examine human folly and institutional corruption. Both demonstrate that satire and dark humor can simultaneously entertain and provoke critical thought. Swift's literary techniques remain relevant in contemporary scholarship for their capacity to engage readers ethically and intellectually, highlighting the enduring power of satire as an artistic form.

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