Swift, Jonathan (1667 - 1745)

Summary Article: Swift, Jonathan
From The Columbia Encyclopedia

1667–1745, English author, b. Dublin. He is widely recognized as one of the greatest satirists in the English language.

Early Life and Works
Since his father, an Englishman who had settled in Ireland, died before his birth and his mother deserted him for some time, Swift was dependent upon an uncle for his education. He was sent first to Kilkenny School and then to Trinity College, Dublin, where he managed, in spite of his rebellious behavior, to obtain a degree. In 1689 he became secretary to Sir William Temple at Moor Park, Surrey, where he formed his lifelong attachment to Esther Johnson, the “Stella” of his famous journal. Disappointed of church preferment in England, Swift returned to Ireland, where he was ordained an Anglican priest and in 1695 was given the small prebend of Kilroot.

Unable to make a success in Ireland, Swift returned to Moor Park the following year, remaining until Temple's death in 1699. During this period he wrote The Battle of the Books, in which he defended Temple’s contention that the ancients were superior to the moderns in literature and learning, and A Tale of a Tub, a satire on religious excesses. These works were not published, however, until 1704. Again disappointment with his advancement sent him back to Ireland, where he was given the living of Laracor.

In the course of numerous visits to London he became friendly with Addison and Steele and active in Whig politics. His Whig sympathies were severed, however, when that party demonstrated its unfriendliness to the Anglican Church. In 1708 he began a series of pamphlets on ecclesiastical issues with his ironic Argument against Abolishing Christianity. He joined the Tories in 1710, edited the Tory Examiner for a year, and wrote various political pamphlets, notably The Conduct of the Allies (1711), Remarks on the Barrier Treaty (1712), and The Public Spirit of the Whigs (1714), in reply to Steele’s Crisis.

Later Life and Works
In 1713 Swift became dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, a position he held until his death. That same year he joined Pope, Arbuthnot, Gay, and others in forming the celebrated Scriblerus Club. About this time Swift became involved with another woman, Esther Vanhomrigh, the “Vanessa” of his poem Cadenus and Vanessa. The intensity of his relationship with her, as with Stella, is questionable, but Vanessa died a few weeks after his final rupture with her in 1723. Swift became a national hero of the Irish with his Draper Letters (1724) and his bitterly ironical pamphlet A Modest Proposal (1729), which propounds that the children of the poor be sold as food for the tables of the rich.

Swift’s satirical masterpiece Gulliver’s Travels appeared in 1726. Written in four parts, it describes the travels of Lemuel Gulliver to Lilliput, a land inhabited by tiny people whose diminutive size renders all their pompous activities absurd; to Brobdingnag, a land populated by giants who are amused when Gulliver tells them about the glories of England; to Laputa and its neighbor Lagado, peopled by quack philosophers and scientists; and to the land of the Houyhnhnms, where horses behave with reason and men, called Yahoos, behave as beasts. Ironically, this ruthless satire of human follies subsequently was
turned into an expurgated story for children. In his last years Swift was paralyzed and afflicted with a brain disorder, and by 1742 he was declared unsound of mind. He was buried in St. Patrick’s, Dublin, beside Stella.

Bibliography


APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA