

## Jonathan Swift

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Between 1600 and 1900, the people with the best opportunities to write and publish in Ireland were members of the Anglo-Irish ruling class. These people generally identified themselves as being English and frequently went to London to take advantage of the greater number of theaters and publishers there. These Anglo-Irish writers often maintained emotional ties to Ireland that surfaced in the content and style of their work. And Jonathan Swift was no exception. Born in Dublin in 1667 to Protestant English parents, Jonathan Swift was Ireland's first great contributor to English literature. Swift faced financial challenges after his father's early death, but the help of an uncle enabled him to receive an education at Trinity College. He moved to London to serve as secretary to Sir William Temple,

who was a leading advisor to King Charles II. With Temple's help, Swift obtained appointments with the Church of England in both England and Ireland. In 1713 he became the dean of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, where he remained for the rest of his life; when historians of the Protestant Ascendancy refer to "the dean" they are talking about Swift.

Swift was no big fan of living in Ireland. At the same time, he was quite aware of the problems facing Ireland, most of which were brought on by its colonial status. The older he got, the more he identified with his adoptive homeland, and this became an inspiration for many of his most biting critiques. In his early career, Swift used his talents for satire and allegory in addressing these political causes. His work skillfully articulated the positions of the Tory party<sup>1</sup> while skewing his enemies. As his career progressed, he increasingly identified with Ireland. His "Drapier's Letters" (1724), which helped block an English coinage scheme that would have debased the Irish currency, made him a hero in Dublin. He bitterly attacked the society which tolerated the terrible condition of poverty and overpopulation. He published "A Modest Proposal" (1729), a savage biting satire in which he offers for public consideration a scheme for killing off year-old children, whose flesh will make a 'most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food'. It was a bitterly ironic attack on Whig policies<sup>2</sup> of ignoring Irish social problems.

Swift's greatest work was not so much an attack on a political enemy as a criticism of human irrationality. *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts* by Lemuel Gulliver, better known to us as *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726 is a satire in the form of a fantastic travel journal. The version read to children bears little or no resemblance to the Swiftian original. Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's physician, voyages to four exotic lands: Gulliver discovers that in the land of Lilliput, where no one is more than 6 inches tall, that the main difference between two dominant political factions is the controversy over which end of their breakfast boiled eggs to lop off. The dispute had already resulted in eleven thousand deaths. The other lands included Brobdingnag, a land of giants; Laputa, an empire run by wise men; and Houyhnhnmland, where the Houyhnhnms are rational and virtuous horses and Yahoos are described as vicious and physically disgusting humans.

His tendency to contradict himself over the course of his publications put together with his personal life, and political affiliations, makes Swift's true opinions hard to gauge. Swift was a man of changeable character, who was depressed by human behavior and had a very low opinion of mankind as a whole. Ironically, he was perhaps only able to remain devoutly loyal to a single idea throughout his life: his religion. However, it is clear that Swift believed in a free Ireland as long as it was a Protestant-controlled Ireland. This ensured the survival of both himself and the Church of Ireland.

A lot of curiosity surrounds Swift's relationships with two women. The first was Ester Johnson. Swift had met her in England when she was eight, and he was her twenty-one-year old tutor. He called her 'Stella' and in 1702, by the time she was twenty years of age, he brought her to Ireland. There were rumors that the two were lovers, even that they had secretly married. The second woman, Esther Vanhomrigh, nicknamed Vanessa, he also met in England. This second Esther returned with him to Ireland and became Swift's lover and correspondent for over ten years. She was eventually cast aside for Johnson and went on to die a broken-hearted woman. He frequently corresponded with both women. Some of the letters to Johnson were published as *Journal to Stella*, while Vanhomrigh was the inspiration for published poems, namely *Cadenus and Vanessa*. When Stella died Swift was at her bedside and was deeply affected by her passing. There is no evidence that Swift ever married.

The later years of Swift's life were a constant struggle with mental illness. He suffered a stroke in 1742, leaving him unable to speak. He died three years later and was laid to rest beside Ester Johnson inside Dublin's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Most of his fortune, a sum of 12,000 pounds, was left for the endowment of a hospital in Dublin for the mentally ill. St. Patrick's Hospital, founded in 1757, is still with us today.

Near Swift's burial site in St. Patrick's Cathedral is his epitaph, inscribed in Latin, and composed by the Dean himself. It says:

Here lies the body of Jonathan Swift,  
Doctor of Sacred Theology,  
Dean of this Cathedral,  
Where savage indignation can no longer tear at his heart.  
Pass on traveller, and, if you can, emulate his tireless efforts in defence of liberty.

Jonathan Swift, dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, satirist, poet, essayist, and troublemaker, died October 19, 1745 at the age of 78.

#### **Notes:**

Tory party<sup>1</sup> believed inheritance based on birth was the foundation of a stable society. Tories tend to support a stronger monarchy.

Whig policies<sup>2</sup> opposed absolute monarchy, Catholic emancipation and wanted more power for Parliament. Whigs were defined by large industry, merchantmen, and empire-building, dubbed the "new money" of the time, (today's liberals).