

A Writer's Model

Satire in the Eighteenth Century

The eighteenth century was known as the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason for its emphasis on reason and common sense. Some scientists, writers, and philosophers, however, divorced reason from common sense. The result was reason carried to ludicrous extremes. Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Voltaire—three of the most important writers of the eighteenth century—used satire to ridicule the intellectual folly of the day.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift uses satire to present a humorous characterization of scientists and to expose some of their impractical ideas. Swift creates a fictional island, Laputa, where members of the nobility regard themselves as scientists. These Laputians' heads are always tilted to one side as if they are in deep thought. In addition, their eyes are strangely arranged—one of them turns inward, and the other turns straight up to show that their thoughts are fixed on themselves and on higher ideas. Swift turns the mental characteristics of the Laputians into humorous physical characteristics. The position of their heads suggests that they are lost in thought and cannot look at anything straight on. In addition, due to the position of their eyes, they cannot see the ground and so they are not down to earth. As evidence of the Laputians' impracticality, the tailor sent to make clothes for Gulliver takes measurements with scientific instruments made for other tasks. Ironically, the result is that Gulliver's new clothes don't fit. Like the scientists of the eighteenth century, the Laputians have become so carried away with knowledge for its own sake that they have lost sight of common sense.

Alexander Pope satirizes the literature of the time in his long poem *The Dunciad*, which praises a goddess named Dulness. The title *The Dunciad* makes fun of poems written by stupid people—dunces. The goddess named Dulness implies that these poets are inspired by dullness. In other words, Pope is saying that the poets of his day value dullness and write boring poems. His character, a poet named Bays, prays to Dulness, asking her to “spread a healing mist before the mind” and to replace reason with cobwebs (I, 174). Instead of asking for his mind to be sharp and clear, as one would expect, Bays wants the opposite. Pope uses the stylistic device of irony to ridicule the dull and dimwitted writers of his day.

In *Candide*, Voltaire makes fun of eighteenth-century philosophers who teach that the world is a rational, perfect place. To ridicule this kind of thinking, Voltaire creates a character named Pangloss, who is a

(continued)

INTRODUCTION

Literary period
and background
information

Thesis statement

BODY

Major point

Evidence: summary

Elaboration

Evidence: summary

Elaboration

Major point

Evidence: summary

Elaboration

Evidence: quotation

Elaboration

Major point

Evidence: summary

(continued)

**Evidence: quotation/
summary**

Elaboration

CONCLUSION
**Restatement of
thesis**
Final observation

philosopher. Pangloss teaches the young Candide a popular philosophy of the day: In this “best of all possible worlds,” everything happens for the best (20). However, when Candide goes out to experience this “best of all possible worlds,” he encounters one misfortune after another—he is kicked out of his home, separated from the woman he loves, kidnapped, forced to take part in a brutal war, beaten, nearly killed and eaten, cheated, robbed, shipwrecked, and caught in an earthquake. As Candide suffers, he echoes Pangloss’s ridiculous teachings to others who suffer terrible misfortunes, making this philosophy seem more and more ridiculous. The novel’s irony is the contrast between the optimistic philosophy of some eighteenth-century thinkers and Candide’s actual experience.

Just as the best scientists, writers, and philosophers of the eighteenth century exposed superstitions to the light of reason, Swift, Pope, and Voltaire exposed the misguided reasoning of lesser scientists, writers, and philosophers. In doing so, they established the trend of using satire to fight folly.