

IRONY AND POWER IN ORWELL'S *ANIMAL FARM* AND SWIFT'S SATIRE

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Abstrak

Irony and power dynamics lie at the core of literary satire, functioning not merely as stylistic devices but as instruments of ideological exposure. This article offers a comparative rhetorical analysis of two canonical satiric texts: Jonathan Swift's pamphlet *A Modest Proposal* (1729) and George Orwell's allegorical novella *Animal Farm* (1945). Focusing on the nexus between irony and representations of power, the study investigates how each author exploits rhetorical irony, structural allegory, and narrative voice to reveal the mechanisms of domination—British colonial authority in Swift's Ireland and Soviet authoritarianism in Orwell's political fable. Drawing upon classical rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, and narratology, the article argues that irony serves as a conduit for exposing hegemonic discourses and coercive ideologies. The findings emphasize how both authors manipulate linguistic and narrative irony to render systems of power visible, and how historical context mediates the potency of their critique. Ultimately, this paper positions irony not as mere literary ornamentation, but as a politically charged and ethically consequential tool of resistance.

Keywords: Satire, Social Critique, George Orwell, Jonathan Swift, Rhetoric, *Animal Farm*, *A Modest Proposal*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Irony, as a rhetorical weapon, exposes the fault lines of power. Nowhere is this clearer than in the tradition of literary satire, where authors marshal contradiction, understatement, and inversion to unmask ideological domination. This article investigates how irony functions as a vehicle for power critique in two distinct yet comparable works: Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Although composed in vastly different political eras, both texts employ irony to destabilize authoritative discourses—colonial utilitarianism in Swift's case, revolutionary betrayal in Orwell's. The central question guiding this study is: How do these authors deploy irony to represent, critique, and subvert hegemonic structures of power? This investigation brings together classical rhetoric, modern narratology, and critical discourse theory to trace how linguistic and narrative irony mediate the representation of authority. It argues that both texts exemplify how irony enables readers to perceive the operations of power as constructed, contingent, and ethically suspect.

Furthermore, both texts emerge from deeply political milieus that shaped their respective authors' rhetorical strategies. Swift, writing under British rule in 18th-century Ireland, was intimately familiar with the economic exploitation and moral hypocrisy that accompanied colonial governance. Orwell, reflecting on the rise and betrayal of socialist ideals in the Soviet Union, channels his disillusionment into an allegorical critique that echoes his experiences as a colonial officer in Burma and as a journalist during the Spanish Civil War. The irony in their works is thus not incidental; it is calibrated, sharp, and strategic—designed to force discomfort, provoke reflection, and demand ethical engagement from readers.

This introduction lays the foundation for a deeper exploration of the relationship between irony and power in literary satire. By comparing Swift's darkly comic economic logic with Orwell's chilling political allegory, we aim to demonstrate how irony not only reflects political realities but also intervenes in them. Irony becomes a form of literary activism, a coded language through which dissent can be expressed, even in environments hostile to open critique.

In the sections that follow, this paper will review theoretical and critical perspectives on irony, power, and discourse; outline the sociohistorical contexts in which both authors wrote; and provide close readings of the texts with particular attention to how irony operates within them. The ultimate goal is to understand irony not as a marginal or decorative element of satire but as its core mechanism—a rhetorical strategy with the capacity to subvert, deconstruct, and reimagine dominant narratives of power.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* has been extensive, particularly in its treatment of irony and socio-political critique. Numerous critics have viewed Swift's use of irony as a rhetorical tool to underscore the systemic power dynamics between the British ruling class and the impoverished Irish population. For instance, George Wittkowsky (1943) emphasized that the work's strength lies in its "perfectly maintained ironic tone," which allows Swift to criticize colonial exploitation without overt polemic. In this view, irony becomes a mask that disguises severe accusations beneath layers of apparent absurdity.

Further studies, such as those by Carole Fabricant (1982), have extended this analysis by situating *A Modest Proposal* within the broader tradition of political satire in the eighteenth century. Fabricant argues that Swift's satire is not only aimed at specific policies but at the very logic of Enlightenment rationalism when applied without compassion. This ironic inversion—offering cannibalism as a rational economic solution—exposes the dehumanizing effects of political utilitarianism.

In terms of power dynamics, Michel Foucault's theories on discourse and biopolitics provide a useful framework. While Foucault never addressed Swift directly, his ideas have been applied to readings of Swift's proposal. As Melissa Mowry (2004) suggests, the pamphlet demonstrates how discourses of economic rationality and moral governance become tools for exercising control over bodies—particularly Irish bodies—rendering them subjects of both physical and ideological domination.

Critical interpretations also highlight the role of parody in amplifying these power dynamics. According to Northrop Frye (1957), irony often appears at the lowest level of satire, where it serves to dismantle not just characters or policies, but entire value systems. Swift's narrator, by mimicking the language of cold economic reports, becomes a grotesque embodiment of state power, using "reason" to justify atrocities.

Contemporary postcolonial readings—such as those offered by Edward Said (1993) and later Irish scholars like Declan Kiberd—frame *A Modest Proposal* as a foundational text in the literature of resistance. Though authored by an Anglican cleric and a political insider, Swift's biting irony exposes the cruelty of colonial rule from within, turning the tools of the oppressor—statistics, rational argumentation, Enlightenment rhetoric—against itself.

Taken together, these works show that *A Modest Proposal* continues to offer a rich field for examining the intersection of irony, language, and power. It is a masterclass in rhetorical subversion, where the grotesque serves as mirror to political horror. This study builds on such scholarship while offering a focused exploration of how Swift's manipulation of ironic tone simultaneously mocks, condemns, and destabilizes prevailing power structures.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative comparative textual analysis embedded in critical discourse methodology. Steps include:

- Close Reading – Identification of key ironic passages: Swift’s statistical cannibalism proposals; Orwell’s slogan inversions.
- Contextual Mapping – Correlating textual moments with historical documents (e.g., Irish Poor Laws, Soviet propaganda posters) to expose intertextual resonance.
- Rhetorical Coding – Annotating instances of verbal, situational, and dramatic irony; classifying them according to Booth’s taxonomy.
- Critical Discourse Analysis – Examining lexical choices, speech acts, and narrative structures that naturalise or contest power.
- Comparative Synthesis – Articulating convergences and divergences in ironic technique, ethical stance, and reader positioning

Triangulation across primary texts and secondary scholarship secures interpretive validity. Limitations include the focus on anglophone reception, which future studies might address by exploring translations and non-Western readings.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Irony as Political Technology

Irony in *A Modest Proposal* and *Animal Farm* is not a mere literary device; it is a deliberate political technology engineered to disarm, implicate, and ultimately mobilize the reader. Its function transcends entertainment or satire in the conventional sense—what Swift and Orwell construct is a rhetorical machine built to expose, unsettle, and invert the very epistemologies of power that structure their respective societies.

In Swift, irony is violent in its directness: it weaponizes rational discourse—the language of economists, policymakers, and the Enlightenment elite—to propose something ethically monstrous. The irony lies in the fact that the logic of consumption, when pushed to its extreme, becomes indistinguishable from cannibalism. Swift’s grotesque solution is not an aberration but a logical endpoint of British utilitarianism, and therein lies the political sting: readers are forced to confront the violence inherent in systems that treat people as economic abstractions. Irony thus functions as an epistemological trap; the more convincingly the persona argues, the more damning the indictment becomes—not just of policy, but of the ideology that underwrites it.

In Orwell, irony operates more diffusely, through gradual disillusionment. The shift from revolutionary idealism to tyrannical realism is cloaked in euphemism, slogan, and ritual—discursive mechanisms through which power not only masks its intentions but convinces its subjects to celebrate their own subjugation. The pigs’ linguistic manipulations mirror the totalitarian state’s exploitation of language as a tool for manufacturing consent, in Gramscian terms. Irony arises when the reader perceives the fatal divergence between what is said and what is done: when “All animals are equal” becomes “Some animals are more equal than others,” irony registers not merely as humor, but as a revelation of discursive betrayal. Language becomes the primary site of power, and irony its diagnostic mode.

4.2 The Aesthetics of Disempowerment

Both texts exploit irony to illustrate what might be called the aesthetics of disempowerment—the way domination often masquerades as logic (Swift) or liberation (Orwell). Importantly, irony in these cases is not cynical or passive-aggressive; it is active, surgical, and profoundly ethical. It serves as a mirror that refuses to flatter, reflecting the grotesqueries of empire and ideology with merciless clarity.

Yet irony’s efficacy is always unstable, precisely because it depends on the reader’s capacity to decode its signals. This instability constitutes both its ethical risk and its radical potential. In Swift, misreading the pamphlet at face value transforms satire into sadism. In Orwell, a reader unfamiliar with the history of the Russian Revolution may interpret *Animal Farm* as merely anti-communist rather than anti-authoritarian. Thus, irony becomes a high-stakes game: powerful when understood, perilous when misconstrued.

4.3 Irony as Counter-Hegemonic Practice

Viewed through a post-colonial and Foucauldian lens, irony in both works can be read as a counter-hegemonic practice. In *A Modest Proposal*, irony destabilizes the imperial narrative of “civilizing” the Irish by presenting the colonized body as food, thus laying bare the biopolitical logic of empire. Swift’s narrator is a grotesque parody of the Enlightenment rationalist, deploying statistical calculation in the service of a genocidal logic. His irony is insurgent: it reverses the gaze, exposing colonial rationality as inherently monstrous.

Similarly, Orwell’s irony unmasks the internal colonization of thought under totalitarian regimes. The animals’ blind faith, their gradual historical amnesia, and the linguistic revisionism they accept without question all point to the way discursive control becomes a form of psychic domination. Irony interrupts this domination by demanding that the reader stand outside the system and see it for what it is. In both texts, irony enables the re-politicization of the ordinary—making visible the forms of power that have become banal, bureaucratized, or naturalized.

4.4 Resistance Through Estrangement

Finally, both Swift and Orwell rely on a Brechtian technique of estrangement—what Viktor Shklovsky might call *ostranenie*—to make the familiar strange. Irony is the primary agent of this estrangement. Swift’s economic rhetoric becomes grotesque when applied to human children; Orwell’s animal allegory feels increasingly human as the story progresses. The effect is cognitive and affective dissonance: readers are unsettled, disoriented, and provoked into reflection. This is a mode of resistance: to force the audience to perceive power not as immutable or natural, but as constructed, contingent, and deeply ideological.

In this sense, irony is both revelatory and revolutionary. It opens a space for counter-discourse, for critical re-reading of the social order. The reader becomes, in Booth’s terms, a “second author”—an interpretive agent tasked with completing the satire’s political vision. This collaborative dynamic transforms irony from a stylistic feature into a participatory ethic, one that demands not laughter but action, not detachment but accountability.

5. CONCLUSION

By juxtaposing Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* with George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, this article has demonstrated that irony functions as a potent rhetorical strategy to critique and expose hegemonic structures of power. Swift’s grotesque statistical logic and Orwell’s gradual allegorical inversion each exemplify how language can be manipulated to unveil systems of coercion masked as rationality or ideology. Far from being mere literary embellishment, irony serves as a form of ideological resistance—an interpretive tool that demands readers engage critically with dominant discourses.

This study has illustrated that irony operates on multiple rhetorical levels: it destabilizes linguistic authority, disorients narrative reliability, and implicates the reader in processes of complicity and awakening. Both authors use irony not only to reflect the political realities of their respective eras but also to intervene in them, forging an ethically charged space where dominant ideologies are rendered visible, contingent, and ultimately challengeable.

Future research may expand this comparative lens to twenty-first-century digital satire. How do memes, parodic hashtags, and algorithmic humor draw upon Swiftian hyperbole or Orwellian allegory? Do they maintain irony’s ethical demands or dilute its power into apathy or cynicism? As long as power manipulates language to naturalize domination, ironic satire will remain essential in fostering critical literacy and democratic resistance.

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