

Stylistics and Discourse Analysis of Swift's On Poetry: A Rhapsody

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore Swift's poem On Poetry: A Rhapsody on stylistics and discourse grounds. It is an assault on those fake and false writers who manipulate this sacred field and try to satisfy their worldly ambitions. They write for others and coax and cajole the superiors so that they may shower rewards and money. Such writers are selfish and greedy because they try to befool others and these are away from reality. In swift's age it was a custom to praise kings and queens and grab money from them. Swift calls such fake writers as bastards and illegitimate child.

Keywords: Fake Poets, Satire, Illegitimate, Nature, Art of Poetry

1. Introduction of Swift

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) was a great prose writer. His work "Gulliver Travels" is considered a masterpiece where both children and mature readers are fascinated. He is well known for his bitter satire on human beings and this is why he has been labeled as a misanthrope. This poem by him shows his continuity of carnage and attacks on human beings. In his point of view man is crown of creatures but his nonsense attitude makes him like a beast. He says man should make use of his senses and intellect given by God and should not follow the path of corruption and debauchery. Animals are better than immoral and corrupt people. For this very purpose he makes use of satire that sharp tool indeed. This tool when used by Swift becomes everlasting in English Literature and people having literary cognizance laugh and weep at the same time as this master blaster is dexterous and skillful in his craft.

Discourse, according to Stubbs (1983:1), is "language above the sentence or above the clause" and 'the study of discourse is the study of any aspect of language use. As Fairclough states:

"Discourse constitutes the social. Three dimensions of the social are distinguished – knowledge, social relations, and social identity – and these correspond respectively to three major functions of language ... Discourse is shaped by relations of power, and invested ideologies." (Fairclough 1992:8)

Jonathan Swift's *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* is a lengthy poem that is a bitter but legitimate satire on poets of England who used to flatter and coax higher authorities like kings and queens to get their worldly desires fulfilled. It is immoral and illegitimate attitude to write in favor of someone to get something. Such a reckless attitude by poets is one main reason of destruction in society. A poet is considered to be divine and close to nature who follows the dictates of conscience but who strays away this very soul of poetry becomes a culprit and wrongdoer. It is a debased act that must be criticized at any cost. It is a misplaced human ambition and nature has not created him for this evil practice. The poem is of 494 lines in couplets and it is divided into different verse paragraphs. In the very first paragraph animals are presented wiser than human beings on the basis of their quality to follow their natural abilities. Human beings are often led by their folly and it is against what nature demands from them.

In the second and third verse paragraph, Swift delineates the significance of poetry and its preference over other fields because it is with heavenly influence. Those who want no money or other benefits from kings and queens are true poets and others are stigma on poetry. The god of poetry *Apollo* will never be happy with these fake poets.

In verse paragraph six, the narrator calls himself as an *old experienced sinner*, who can instruct and guide new poets. He tells them to follow the rules of poetry and write down the genre that suits them and they are best in. It is not a child's play for everyone to write poetry and at the same time it suggests true poets not to throw their pens away rather show dexterity and artistry in front of hack writers.

The rest segment of this very poem is to some extent similar as Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1728-1743), satirizes hack poets. Like pope here Swift uses very harsh language, such poets has been called as;

"Dunces, Fools, and Sons of Whores."

These words indicate how much Swift was fed up with hack poets and this is an indicator of his love for poetry that he wanted to see it as sacred duty assigned by nature.

And another line;

"O, Grubstreet! How do I bemoan thee

Whose graceless Children scorn to own thee!"

2. Forms and Devices

Horace, a Latin satirist, has been eulogized by Swift and his use of narrator in events was often mocked along with the people at whom the satire was aimed. Swift also does the same practice which is a subtle and artistic use of irony when he says his narrator in this poem as "*old experienced sinner*". Horace's *Ars Poetica* (the art of poetry) has been elucidated in which a thorough lecture and lesson has been given to poets about writing according to their strengths and tastes. Fake or hack poets make use of improper similes that don't fit. Swift then goes on to tell few more examples in this regard and he is of the view that such hack writers just use similes to fill the space and there is no harmony in the lines and it is beautifully compared with out of order animal sexuality:

"So have I seen ill-coupled Hounds,

Drag different Ways in miry Grounds".

The nature and ancestry of failed poems by false poets are discordant and illegitimate.

Such a poet is compared to a “Bastard” child and has no filial piety and he “*prostitutes the Muse Name.*” The corruption and debauchery of the fake poets has been dexterously satirized. The function of true poetry is to generate goodness in society and cultivate such a frame of mind that does for betterment of the society. People who are selfish and greedy can never be termed as poets rather these are predatory who just want to grab fulfillment of ill intentions.

This poem uses imagery of a circle that shows just how wide-spread corruption in art and life is in the world Swift satirizes. This circle is metaphor for England that is full of sycophant and toady attitude and has prevailed in whole the country. This metaphor also shows *pride* that is universal passion.

The choice of title of the poem “Rhapsody” is very significant as it means an overstatement in which intellectual balance is lost. It suggests fake poets as insane and without intellect as an intellectual is supposed to tell and write that is true and reasonable and avoid buttering and flattering which separates people from reality.

3. Themes and Meanings

This poem provides a lesson that Swift conveys here nicely that follow your true vocation. One should not write poetry for the sake and satisfaction of his own being. God has created every individual with special knack for something and it should be applied accordingly. This poem is an admonition to those who oppose God’s will and prefer their own will.

The end of the poem is very crucial as the narrator is replaced by Swift himself as here that “old sinner” is no one but him. This change is quite visible in these lines;

*“How shall a new Attempter learn
Of diff’rent Spirits to discern”.*

No one knows spirits except God and if one makes such claims is engaged in profane act. This voice is of Swift indeed who is trying to guide fake poets. His own point of view is revealed and he warns that every reader should not try to become a writer. As in the beginning verse paragraph he said;

*“All Human Race wou’d fain be wits,
And Millions miss, for one that hits.”*

Swift after this couplet gives reference of Young’s “*The Universal Passion*” (1725-1728).

4. To Sum Up

It can be safely said that Swift’s *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* is an excellent poem aiming at art for art’s sake. It is unfair and immoral to go away from natural abilities and try something that does not fit and match to someone’s skill and conscience. If this idea of Swift be applied in our pragmatic world, he seems perfectly right in his views as everyone is hankering after pelf, power and money. This maxim fits here that says, “Jack of all trades but master of none”.

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