

**JONATHAN SWIFT: STYLE AND SIGNIFICANCE
OF HIS *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS*
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Abstract

This research paper sheds light on the style and significance of Jonathan swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. This fictional work is very well known among literary media for the author's brilliant use of prose and his way of presenting character and action in it. Swift makes use of those stories telling of European castaways and employs them to serve his literary purpose, and at the same time to serve his personal wish to severely and bitterly attack and satirize those aspects of society which he considers to be social and political ills which should be eliminated. Throughout the use of imagination and exaggerated yet exotic and strange images of people, animals, and things, Swift manages to achieve his aim—both the production of a wonderful fictional work and satire.

المستخلص :

يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على اسلوب واهمية (رحلات جلفر) للكاتب جوناثان سوفت. يعد هذا العمل القصصي معروفا بشكل ملحوظ جدا من قبل الاوساط الادبية وذلك بسبب استخدام الكاتب الصيغة النثرية على نحو رائع وكذلك بسبب طريقة عرضه للشخصية والحدث على حد سواء. لقد وظف سوفت تلك القصص التي تروي عن هؤلاء الأوربيين الذين غرقت سفنهم ولاذو بالعيش على جزرا ماهولة وغير ماهولة واستخدمهم لخدمة غرضه الادبي وفي نفس الوقت لخدمة رغبته الشخصية لهجاء ومهاجمة على نحو قاس ومرير تلك الجوانب الخاصة بالمجتمع والتي ينظر اليها على انها امراض سياسية واجتماعية والتي يجب ازالتها

. فمن خلال استخدامه لعنصر الخيال والصور الغريبة والمبالغ بها استطاع سوفت ان يحقق اغراضه المرجية، الا وهي الهجاء و انتجاز عملا ادبيا رائعا.

This research paper is mainly concerned with the study of *Gulliver's Travels* written by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) as to style and significance, together with his place among literary fictional media. Swift in the first place concerns himself with voyage literature telling of the adventures of a hero, namely Gulliver, and at the same time employing every possible literary methods necessary for criticizing those people and institutions which he rejects during the course of the development of his life and career. He resorts to this kind of fiction for the resources it may provide him as to the elements of suspense and imagination, together with the allegorical and symbolical implications needed for his criticism and satire to be made against those whom he considers to be his foes. Besides, he may make use of all the elements of romance and adventurous experiences that may satisfy the taste of his readers and his yearning desire for criticizing and attacking what he considers to be the social and political ills of his time.

Like Daniel Defoe, Swift makes use of those stories telling of those European castaways on uninhabited and inhabited islands in which everything seems to be strange and exotic—strange people, plants, animals, and insects, besides the so many dangers one may encounter in such places as these, for instance. Any castaway also has inevitably to face a new life with all its dangers and adventurous experiences. The hero of this type of fiction has already been trapped by his creator to confront whatsoever difficulties and adventures he is to imagine and describe. Thus the task of the hero is twofold; he has to adapt himself to the new place with all its unfamiliar things and new situations, and at the same he should think and adopt the best means

whereby he can find a way off the place in which he has already been drifted, so that he will be able to return to his original people among whom he should then adapt himself, especially when he returns to them after a long period of time during which they may have changed too. What come between these hazardous situations are the new experiences, scenes, adventures, hard work for getting the ingredients of survival and return to home, and all the strange things, living and non-living, to be encountered on the new field.

In many ways, some people happen to be castaways by means of a shipwreck, a misadventure, or a mutiny. Of course they are to encounter many problems, difficulties, dangers and adventures, which may form a particular interest on the part of readers. Furthermore, castaways may find themselves unable to adapt themselves to the new life with all its dangers and adventures, or to the new people whom they may encounter on the new land. The hero in such a setting as this is required to cope with the new environment in which he finds himself wily nilly obliged to live, and at the same time he should have in mind that in the new place things may run differently from what he has accustomed to face in his precedent environment, which requires the hero to review his calculations and readiness for the new life he is going to live; in a word, he may change his way of thinking, make some amendments to what he believes to be right or wrong, and do what is required for the sake of his survival in the strange place first and for the sake of his safe departure from it next. Besides, he will partly or completely deviate from what he considers to be normal ideas held by the society he has descended from to the new place, and at the same time he will be in a position to discern those negative aspects of his own society when compared to the same imaginary ones in the new societies, which may be the subject matter of his bitter satire. Thus, according to Brian Vickers,

In Swift's satire we see a traveler telling the representatives of imaginary societies the weaknesses of our own society, and the direct nature of such satire being put in an indirect frame is reinforced by the instructive comments of the listener, discourse becomes dialogue....In *Gulliver's Travels* the criticism of society is finite and particular, sharply focused and transfixing both Gulliver and the reader...Swift's satire—by social comparison—is the most effective mode within his work, for although he uses a great variety of satiric method, exaggeration and diminution, relativism carried to the ultimate, dichotomies between physical size and moral worth or between reason and the passions, mock computations which increase grotesqueness, descriptions of peculiar practices in imaginary societies...turn to be extremely similar to our own .¹

In the case of *Gulliver's Travels*, the hero develops a certain critical sense about his surroundings. He may be in some ways so changed in the wilderness that he does not want to return to his original country, and he remains estranged or alienated from the society which he once left, and thus he may or may not accept his former society.

Swift makes it clear that he lets his hero, Lemuel Gulliver, narrate the entire story to the reader, employing whatever means available to him to make his fantasy appear to be real manifestations of actual life. Gulliver is an imaginary character endeavoring to make readers believe his story. Here Swift tries to mingle both reality and imagination and produce his fictional work in an attempt to achieve his purpose—the

ridicule of all manners relevant to mankind. Thus the story is a blend of what the author imagines to be and what his hero presents as being narratives and autobiographical remarks—all presented within the mould of reality and imagination as well. Deceptive in the real sense of the term, the remarks are not to be taken for granted when considered under the influence of the willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the readers; yet, especially children easily believe in the most fantastic and imaginary worlds. At the beginning of the story, Gulliver remarks that he is a native of England and gives some illustrations about his personal life and adventures by using affirmative sentences to indicate that what he says is quite real.²

In such a story as *Gulliver's Travels*, the hero is in a position to encounter a conflict with the new environment besides the conflict that is to occur within his mind. Thus Odysseus' rejection of Calypso for the sake of his own country is in all likelihood identical with Prospero's rejection of the island and the magic which he likes very much, which is a proof of the hero's moral values and responsibility towards his people, for instance, and at the same time it emphasizes certain values and ideals in Odysseus' and Prospero's societies to which they want to return. However, sometimes the return of the heroes to their societies may create a big problem for them in that they may find themselves unable to cope with them in so far as their societies have already changed to a greater or lesser extent. Gulliver's abundance of the European society, for instance, when he returns at the end of his fourth voyage, is, to a great extent, a very harsh and bitter criticism of the moral laziness of Europe during the time when the story is written.

As far as the hero of *Gulliver's Travels* is concerned, he is presented as a middle-class worker who has descended from a middle-class society. Gulliver feels that he has been alienated and estranged in his society when he returns to his place of origin, London, and he faces

many troubles when trying to adjust himself to it. This story has been regarded most popular all over the world and highly enjoyable by both children and adults as well, due to the fantastic yet imaginary presentation of both action and character, which excites all ingredients of suspense for the sake of arousing all forms of curiosity.

Swift deals with the human experience and looks at all things from a new perspective and creates for his four stories comprising *Gulliver's Travels* new dimensions: thus he tries in them to mock religious values and beliefs, government, and society as a whole that believe in opinions which are different from his own. He believes that they are all to show signs of corruption—the English government, religion, society, and man in general—due to the fact that he is a misanthrope, a person who hates mankind and avoids society. Furthermore, voyage fiction for the most part, is always to comprise those ill aspects the voyager may find in the alien societies he may confront that may become the subject of criticism on the part of his own actual society. B. P Chaudhuri manifests his own point of view in this respect, saying:

Voyages, both authentic and imaginary, were in fact one of the prominent literary genres. The intent of the imaginary voyage was almost always to satirize the existing European order, and it did so by playing up the innocence, manliness, and high ethical standards of the untutored peoples whom the voyager claimed to have met. But the real voyages also, even those recounted by missionaries and priests, pointed to the same conclusion. ³

Gulliver's Travels displays bitter satire and condemnation of the European life and government and the differences between religions: this is the reason why this work is always discussed and analyzed from the satiric point of view and perspectives. Interestingly enough, Gulliver shows different attitudes towards life when he returns home. He finds himself unable to cope with the society he has left and ends as a misanthrope and pessimist. At the end of the second part, Gulliver says the following remarks as soon as he enters his house after his return from his voyage to the country of the Brobdingnagians, which he has already finished. The following passage shows how Gulliver abhors his wife, daughter and the society around him:

When I came to my own House....My wife ran out to embrace me, but I stooped lower than her Knees, thinking she could otherwise never be able to reach my Mouth. My daughter kneeled to ask for my Blessing, but I could not see her till she arose; having been so long used to stand [sic] with my Head and Eyes erect to above Sixty Foot [sic]; and then I went to take her up with one Hand, by the Waist. I looked down upon the Servants, and one or two Friends who were in the House, as if they had been Pigmies, and I a Giant.⁴

Particular allegories are presented in the work under consideration. In it, the two islands of the Lilliputian and the Frenscanations are made to stand for England and France, and thus the feud between the two nations of both islands stand for the feud between the nations of both England and France. The canal between the two islands

is to stand for the way between England and France. Swift's work is both satirical and humorous in which the description of the imaginary countries provides the writer with a free and perfect start to criticize and attack the European society. At the end of his life Swift seems to encounter circumstances that make him more sarcastic and bitter than he has ever been before. Joseph Horrell comments on the satirical method of Swift and says the following in this regard:

Prose is normally the vehicle of truth, and what is Swift's fiction must be Captain Gulliver's 'faithful History' of his travels. Thus Swift insinuates his classic of satire into the precincts of fiction. One historian of the English novel says that *Gulliver's Travels* 'stands beside *Robinson Crusoe* as a classic of realism....Defoe might well have been responsible for all the preliminaries ushering Mr. Gulliver upon the scene.'⁵

Both Swift and Defoe deal with the same issues and both attack particular aspects of human life and character, to a greater or lesser extent. Nevertheless, Swift differs from Defoe in that he does not have the latter writer's "coherence of purpose,"⁶ in so far as he does not possess the ability to gather together all the resources necessary for his fictional experience which he employs for the sake of his personal satire against mankind and politics, which has been underlying the essence of his feelings, attitudes, and aspirations:

His [Swift's] world has declined so catastrophically from its 'original' that it cannot generate innocent narratives worth pursuing for their own sake.

Defoe's always pressing obligation to moralize is smothered in the sheer delight he takes in his material; but Swift's moral judgments are so overpowering as to be regenerative, distorting his material, so to speak, by their paralytic effect on certain areas of sensibility.⁷

Swift limits his portrayal of his hero to a man torn among things preferring the society of horses to that of men, a man who always hates society. The actual reason behind this kind of portrayal is Swift's digressions that place his work out of the domain of fiction, according to Walter Allen.⁸

In his *A Tale of a Tub*, Swift attacks two non-conformist sects of Christianity, Catholicism, and Presbyterianism, in a farcical and funny manner to the extent that people of his age might consider it blasphemous.⁹ Because of his attack against religion, Queen Ann had been shocked and found it a significant reason to decide that he should not be allowed to be promoted as a bishop. This event, of course, had worsened the situation and increased Swift's contempt and indignation towards the state in particular and mankind in general. Hence, in his next work *Gulliver's Travels* he has strengthened his attack against religion, the state, and mankind, and presented the most caustic and bitter satire by means of allegory, symbolism, strange characters and creatures, and above all, ironical yet humorous remarks and descriptions:

In the fourth part of the book [*Gulliver's Travels*], where the Houyhnhnms—horses with rational souls and the highest moral instincts—are contrasted with the filthy, depraved Yahoos, who

are really human beings, Swift's hatred of man reaches its climax. Nothing is more powerful or horrible than the moment when Gulliver reaches home and cannot bear the touch of his wife—her smell is the smell of a Yahoo and makes him want to vomit.¹⁰

Swift's agitated soul finds its expression in the many escapes Gulliver makes during the course of his travels which are expressive and illustrative of Swift's wish to escape from Ireland which he considers a jail and his residence in it a kind of exile. He feels that he begins to live in wilderness after Queen Ann has dismissed his political friends. The stratagem employed by the author at the beginning of the story is meant to soften that kind of teasing effects from the fact that the unrealities of what he has already presented have been so much exaggerated to the extent that they can hardly be believed no matter how much suspension of disbelief is experienced in all the respects of the book:

The veristic trimmings of the front matter and opening paragraphs of *Gulliver's Travels*, even for first-time readers of the first edition, ultimately exist in relation to elements in the book which are designedly so fantastic as to defy any suspension of disbelief. The deceptive opening partly serves as a guard-lowering ruse, an impression of truth and sympathetic ordinariness, softening the reader into complacency before assaulting him with a bewildering blend of inassimilable fantasy and

harshly disturbing revelations about the human creature.¹¹

Irony is considered one of the most influential and effective means of satire and thus it assumes its significant presence in Swift's works. When the hero displays an expression about a particular situation and then says something opposite to it the latter opposite can by no means be taken at its literal and face value; it cannot be understood other than in the opposite sense; that is, in line with the former expression. Therefore, such ironical remarks are not to be considered inconsistencies or gyrations on the part of the hero. The book, for instance, shows such inconsistency which cannot be tolerated at all. Gulliver contradicts his speech on two different occasions, for instance; this inconsistency is interpreted in terms of irony, for the contradiction cannot be accepted unless it is meant to excite an ironical situation. Thus Gulliver despises his country in the following passage and praises it in the next one:

To say the truth, I had conceived a few scruples with relation to the distributive Justice of Princes upon those occasions. For instance, a crew of Pyrates are driven by a Storm they know not whither; at length a Boy discovers Land from the Top-mast; they go on Shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless people... they murder two or three Dozens of the Natives, bring away a Couple more by force for a Sample, return home, and get their Pardon.¹²

The following passage is ironic:

But this Description, I confess, doth by no means affect the British Nation, who may be an example to the whole world for their wisdom, care, and Justice in planting colonies; their liberal endowments for the advancement of religion and Learning; their choice of devout and able pastors to propagate *Christianity*.¹³

It must be taken into consideration that Gulliver cannot at all represent his creator in all the aspects of his own personality; he is only the means whereby Swift can express his satire against his enemies and hide himself behind the curtain which he has already created by all the illusionary, deceptive means, far-fetched imagery, and sights, places, events, characters, and symbols displayed with phantasmagoric effects and situations that can be objectified by the first-time reader of the work. Furthermore, when the book appeared for the first time in 1726 it did not bear the name of the real author; Swift did not even claim its authorship for certain reasons and he let it appear to be the work that was entitled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* written by Lemuel Gulliver, "first a SURGEON, and then a CAPTAIN of several ships. There was no over sign of Swift's authorship."¹⁴

On the other hand, Swift's book does not present the essence of that book which is seemingly trying to mock or parody, for in it there is just satire in its purest sense made against the human creature and the social and political system of his time only made because of some particular personal reasons. Interestingly enough, Swift also draws on Hakluyt's travel books and others in an attempt to present a satire against the human race, besides his awareness of classical works and

the study of human life and character, and thus *Gulliver's Travels* appears to be a book that "belongs to a species of parody which is not mainly concerned with the books it is ostensibly mimicking, but uses the medium of parody to explore matters of more central and substantial human import." ¹⁵ Hence, to Allen, Swift can by no means be called a novelist in the real sense of the word in so far as satire does not actually comprise all the ingredients of a novel, but only a part of it and as Allen explicitly puts it in the following passage:

Swift, who, though possessing many of the attributes of a novelist, cannot be called one. *Gulliver's Travels* is a work of fiction but not a novel, though in it Swift uses circumstantial detail after the manner of Defoe in order to persuade us of the truth of his Lilliputians and Brobdignagians. And great as his genius was, one feels that Swift could never have been a novelist. Satire can only be part of the novelist's make-up; in Swift's it was everything." ¹⁶

It may be suggested that Swift goes to extremes when he tries to use some tricks to make his work appear to be real, to exaggerate the exaggerated and the imaginary is that which cannot be digested or tolerated by any reader and for which suspension of disbelief is impossible except in the case of children that find themselves interested most in the abridged edition of his *Gulliver's Travels* as long as they easily believe in the most extraordinary and imaginary events, strange creatures and things—things that are often to occur in cartoon films and the like. Swift himself confesses in the voice of his titular hero the fact that his work cannot pass without any criticism, and that

any work relating facts should be subject to censure, as shown in the following passage which can also be regarded as a good example to prove the author's digressions and deviations from the main subject matter of his fictional work:

I am not a little pleased that this Work of mine can possibly meet without Censurers: for what Objections can be made against a writer who relates only plain Facts that happened in such distant Countries, where we have not the least interest with respect either to trade or Negotiations? I have carefully avoided every Fault with which common writers of travels are often too justly charged. ¹⁷

Thus *Gulliver's Travels* appeals, as a book of interest and delight, to a lesser or greater extent, to both children (in its abridged versions) and adults simultaneously. Even Swift's criticism against the political situation of his country and his call for a utopian country can by no means be tolerated not only because his aspirations cannot be fulfilled but also because such criticisms and way of thinking cannot be made by any ordinary person except a misanthrope:

The suggestion, as the story unfolds, is that he has been shattered into total misanthropy by his experience of human doings and the revelations of the Hyounhnm Utopia. This Utopia, like More's commonwealth of that time and Plato's Republic, is a 'no place', a country of the mind, unavailable to human aspiration except as a national ideal. ¹⁸

Part of the utopian indications, for instance, which is admired by Gulliver and which he finds in the Houyhnhnms, is that they do not know any word related to evil practices or deformities except those words which have already been borrowed from the Yahoos, and as Gulliver expresses it clearly in the following words: "I know not whether it may be worth observing, that the Houyhnhnms have no Word in their Language to express anything that is *evil*, except what they borrow from the Deformities or ill Qualities of the *Yahoos*." ¹⁹

However, Alexander Pope, Swift's intimate friend and contemporary, has approved the book and declared that no one could be angry with the book and that it was wonderful as shown in his letter of November 16th, 1726, that was sent to Swift:

I congratulate you first upon what you call your cousin's wonderful book...and I prophesy will be in future the admiration of all men....

I find no considerable man very angry at the book; some indeed think it rather too bold, and too general a Satire: but none that I hear of accuse it of particular reflections (I mean no persons of consequence, or good judgement; the mob of criticks, you know always are desirous to apply Satire to those that they envy for being above them.

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Swift does always satirize many aspects of the English society to the extent that his book may be accused of needless deviations and digressions from the main subject matter which is supposed to be pertaining to voyage fiction. The following passage shows how he uses

his scourge against the noblemen of his country which occurs when Gulliver discusses the idea of nobility with his master during his stay among the Houyhnhnms:

Our young *Noblemen* are bred from their Childhood in Idleness and Luxury; that as soon as Years will permit, they consume their Vigour, and contract odious Diseases among lewd Females; and when their Fortunes are almost ruined, they marry some Woman of mean Birth, disagreeable Person and unsound Constitution, merely for the sake of Money, whom they hate and despise. That the Productions of such Marriages are generally scrupulous, rickety or deformed Children; by which Means the Family seldom continues above three Generations, unless the Wife take Care to provide a healthy Father among her Neighbours or Domesticks, in order to improve and continue the Breed.²¹

Man in *Gulliver's Travels* is looked upon as a creature like any other lower creatures that have been naturally created in this universe, and not as a creature of supreme value and superiority over other creatures of the lower species, and at the same time man is bitterly satirized and condemned to be a rational animal. Though the book appeals most to children, especially its abridged edition, it presents harsh assaults against the condition of man and society in general. Thus, the name of Swift is always associated with his book *Gulliver's Travels* or the abridged version of it, "a famous children's book, and is also one of the bleakest satires of the human condition."²² At the same

time the book can be considered a study of the history of man, at a particular period of time with its unique culture, politics, and social relationships.

Being one of the vogues of the age, voyage and discovery were to form two essential ingredients of the late eighteenth-century England and they were thus referred to not only in the fiction that represented reality in its abstract sense, but they were also used in fiction satirizing the human race. As to the extent to which Swift's realism and his connection with reality, it is ostensibly made clear in *Gulliver's Travels* that he moves from fantasy, imagination, and the extraordinary and the supernatural to the more particular and more real aspects of human life and society, and as pointed out by M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham:

In *Gulliver's Travels* Swift converts to satiric use the early eighteenth-century accounts of voyage and discovery...and many writers use their imaginary settings, as Swift had in *Gulliver's Travels*, for political and social satire.²³

To conclude, Swift employs those stories about castaways scattered here and there about whom many stories have been woven, imaginary and realistic, and at the same time he makes use of the voyage literature available to him at the time, and thus he manages to present one of the most interesting fictional arts the English library has ever been proud of. The story is not only interesting, but it is also a kind of satire against so many institutions related to human life.

Notes

1. Brian Vickers, as quoted in P. B. Chaudhuri, *Jonathan Swift: Gulliver's Travels* (New Delhi: Aarti Book Centre, Educational Publishers, 1974), p. 154.
2. In the faked letter Gulliver wrote to his supposed cousin Sympson: this is a pseudonym used by Swift to stand for the author of *A new Voyage to the East Indies* (1715), a plagiarized version of an earlier book of travel which is one of the main sources of *Gulliver's Travels* for a real Richard Sympson who became Gulliver's cousin as joke for the book is a fiction and it is a mock travel book. Sympson might recall William Symson, the fake Gulliver, as shown in the notes written by Ian Higgins, which are included in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, edited with an Introduction by Claude Rawson and Notes by Ian Higgins (Oxford: Oxford university Press. 2005), p. 284.
3. P. B. Chaudhuri, *Jonathan Swift: Gulliver's Travels* p. 180.
4. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*. Edited with an Introduction by Claude Rawson and Notes by Ian Higgins) Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2005) p.137.
5. Joseph Horrell, "What Gulliver Knew," in *Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., Ernest Tuveson pp. 55-70, *Twentieth Century Views Series*, Series editor, Manyard Mack, (New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, Private Limited, 1979), pp.55-56.
6. Horrell, "What Gulliver Knew," p.56.
7. Ibid., p. 57.
8. Walter Allen, *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1975), p. 42.
9. John Burgess Wilson, *English Literature: A Survey for Students* (Hong Kong: Longman, 1964), p.202
10. Ibid.

11. Claude Rawson, "Introduction" to Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. xv.
12. Ibid., p. xxiii.
13. Ibid., p. xxiv.
14. Ibid., p. xi.
15. Rawson, in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, pp. x-xi.
16. Allen, p. 42.
17. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* , p. 273.
18. Rawson, in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. xl.
19. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 257.
20. Alexander Pope, in Ismail Salami, ed. *Thirty Great Novels, including biography, plot, contemporary setting, point of view, theme, style, form, structure, and character analysis* (Tehran: Mehrandish books, 1999), p. 191.
21. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* p. 239.
22. Rawson, in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* p. x.
23. M. H. Abrams, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, , *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9th edition (Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 322-323.

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