


The Vexing but Diverting Web of Relationship: Swift, Gulliver, and the Reader

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate interplay between author, character, and reader in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Through a detailed analysis, the study investigates how Swift constructs a multifaceted web of relationships that both vexes and diverts the reader. By examining the satirical nuances and narrative techniques employed by Swift, the paper elucidates the complex dynamics between Gulliver's evolving perspective and the reader's reception of his voyages. The analysis reveals how Swift's sophisticated manipulation of irony and satire not only critiques contemporary society but also engages readers in a deeper reflection on human nature and societal constructs. Ultimately, this study highlights the enduring relevance of "Gulliver's Travels" and its ability to provoke thought and entertain through its layered narrative and rich character development.

The letters that preclude most editions of *Gulliver's Travels* set a tone of intrigue and ambiguity that is sustained throughout the entire book. Gulliver's and Sympson's respective letters, set supposedly after the conclusion of Gulliver's final voyage, lay the foundation for one of the most remarkable relationships between reader, character, and author in the history of English literature. They open the book, coming together in the text to create a mechanism that works initially at such a level as to disorient the reader. After all what is read are the confessions of two fake characters, in a fake setting, affirming to the reader that everything printed thereafter is true!

In another respect, Gulliver's letter to Sympson operates as an "apology" of sorts, as Gulliver swears his loyalty to Queen Anne and cites unauthorized alterations made to his journals:

Likewise, in the Account of the Academy of Projectors, and several Passages of my Discourse to my Master Houyhnhnm, you have either omitted some material Circumstances, or minced or changed them in such a Manner that I do hardly know mine own Work.ⁱ

This passage works to establish Swift's mechanism that intrigues the reader with Gulliver's elevated language, his interesting word choices ("Houyhnhnm," "Academy of Projectors"), and the implicit promise of something that might create a scandal. Also, the sheer complexity of Gulliver's sentences in this passage enhances the disorienting effect created by the motif of a framed story. The end result of this ambiguity and reader's disorientation is a scenario in which the reader is left quite unsure about who or what to believe in the text, but is led on by intrigue and the desire to know more. Swift, as the author, remains liberated somewhere in the midst, free from the disoriented censor's criticism.ⁱⁱ

As the text of *Gulliver's Travels* begins with Gulliver's Voyage to Lilliput, the autobiographical information that Gulliver volunteers to the reader stands out because it becomes apparent that he has been "pushed around," to some degree, throughout his entire life. He says:

My Father has a small Estate in Nottinghamshire; I was the Third of five Sons. He sent me to Emanuel College in Cambridge, at Fourteen Years old....But the Charge of maintaining me (although I had a very scanty Allowance) being too great for a narrow Fortune; I was bound an Apprentice to Mr. James Bates (39).

A line can be drawn between Gulliver as a character being tossed about by life, and the reader being tossed about by a novel—particularly one as rich in meaning and ambiguity as is *Gulliver's Travels*.

In fact, as the text progresses, the argument can be made that Gulliver is the reader on a number of allegorical levels. Gulliver's name, perhaps somewhat of a pun on "gullible" is just the beginning of Swift's hints. After all, anyone who reads a novel is, to some extent, gullible and believing of the messages in the author's words. Gulliver and the reader are one and the same on a more physical level, as well, as the text is written from Gulliver's first-person perspective. The reader is forced to identify with Gulliver because Gulliver's perspective, however flawed or biased, is his only entrance offered by Swift into the world of the novel. Finally, there exists a metaphorical level; Gulliver and the reader are the only agents involved that bring "human" perspective to the many strange cultures that the text visits.

As character and reader are one and the same, Swift gives himself the artistic liberty to criticize the reader through Gulliver. Swift can therefore avoid direct dialogue with the reader, abstaining from insulting by prodding at his protagonist. The effect of this literary mechanism provides for many levels at which the text can be interpreted by the reader. One reader, unknowing of Swift's equation drawn between Gulliver and the reader, might find Gulliver's folly and misadventure rather comical. The repeated emergence of low humor in the text certainly supports such an idea, as the lower reader might find entertainment in Swift's toilet humor. Another reader might be well aware of Swift's criticism of human nature and take insult; yet another, perhaps more enlightened, might identify Swift's humility and playful intent and use Swift's irony and criticism as a means of self-improvement and education. Certainly, none of these readers is wrong, and from a critical perspective, this aspect of *Gulliver's Travels* emerges as high praise. After all, as students of literature, we celebrate pieces that offer myriads of different readings based on the perspectives of different readers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Take, as an example, the gaping discrepancy between what Gulliver says in the text, and what he actually seems to believe, as portrayed by his interactions with his surroundings. When Gulliver arrives on the shores of Brobdingnag, he makes some interesting remarks regarding size:

For, as human Creatures are observed to be more Savage and cruel in Proportion to their Bulk; what could I expect but to be a Morsel in the Mouth of the first among these enormous Barbarians who should happen to seize me? Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the Right when they tell us that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison (94).

This statement is remarkably odd, first of all, because the beginning of it is *dead wrong*. If the reader agrees with Gulliver's theory that cruelty is proportionate to physical size, then he, like Gulliver, has learned absolutely nothing from our hero's experiences at the hands of the tiny, yet exceedingly sly Lilliputians (Todd 249). The latter part of this statement also stands out as an ironic comment for Gulliver to make. As shown by his arrogance among the smaller Lilliputians, it is apparent that he does not believe at all that things are relative, even though he can repeat the words of philosophers: he is unconscious of the import of what he says. Perhaps these discrepancies between what Gulliver says and what he does is a window into a problem suffered by all humankind—something that John M. Bullitt calls the "perception of the incongruity in life" (5). Through highlighting the emptiness of language, Swift inevitably turns the eye of criticism towards us, the readers. After all, how often is it that we as humans mean exactly what we say; and how often do the words we choose to explain this intent properly reflect ourselves?

This question leads to Gulliver's (and Swift's) campaign against the "prostitute writers" (187) of history and anthropology texts. Though Gulliver boasts about the truthfulness and impartiality in conveying his memoirs to the reading audience, a strong irony emerges when the reader identifies how Gulliver never loses his sense of righteousness and his ethnocentrism. Even when he describes accurately what he senses (Gulliver's prose is positively littered with verbs of perception), the reader must ask whether or not paying attention to such details is in and of itself a manifestation of some sort of cultural or personal bias (Elliott 48). For example, in Part II, Chapter V, Gulliver's attempts to prove his navigational skill to the Brobdingnagian Queen makes him look like little more than a sideshow to the Brobdingnagians, and Gulliver remains unaware: "Here I often used to row for my Diversion, as well as that of the Queen and her Ladies, who thought themselves agreeably entertained with my Skill and Agility" (122). Perhaps Gulliver gets his just deserts when he nearly drowns in the trough—a scene not all too different than that in which he unsuccessfully leaps the pile of dung.

Gulliver's cultural bias is evident in the dialogue with the Brobdingnagian King. Indeed, Swift deserves praise for using great tact in conveying his criticism of English politics in those passages, as neither Swift nor his

protagonist gives any offense to the powers that be. Rather, Gulliver only says the sweetest things of England to the Brobdingnagian King, and it is the King who delivers a harsh response that bewilders Gulliver. Gulliver in turn apologizes to the reader for the King's ignorance, but not before the wise King's perfectly viable criticism has taken an effect on the reading public.

The "prostitute writer" motif arises once again in Gulliver's visit to the island of Laputa—an island whose very name, "la puta" being Spanish for "the whore", is suggestive to the reader. Ironically, Gulliver, who takes great pride in his ability to speak and understand many languages, is ignorant of this origin and dedicates a paragraph of his memoirs in Chapter II to conjecturing rather foolishly about the etymology of this word. Perhaps in this Gulliver is in a way becoming a Laputan—that is, in deep thought and conjecture, he is being drawn further and further from simple, obvious truths. Gulliver presents the reader with another typical Laputan doctrine in Chapter III when he gives his overwhelmingly complex explanation for how the floating island works (161-63).

Though in these few instances, Gulliver assumes a Laputan identity, it is clear that just like he was a giant among the tiny people, and a dwarf among the giants, he is still an opposite. The words that open Chapter VI of Part III establish this very well. "In the School of Political Projectors I was but ill entertained; the Professors appearing in my Judgment wholly out of their Senses, which is a Scene that never fails to make me melancholy" (177). Gulliver is perhaps subconsciously identifying his obsession with the immediate and sensible, and dismissing the Professors of the Academy on the grounds of their levity. Indeed, these differences that Gulliver identifies between himself and the Laputan and Laggadoan people will ultimately cause him to look for ways back home.

By the end of Part III of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift remains yet to deliver his most powerful and impassioned message to the reader about himself, Gulliver, and all of humankind. It is not until Gulliver is outside of the world of "people," and among the Houyhnhnms, that we are able to distinguish Swift's intent. When Gulliver is confronted in this land by a Yahoo—the un-euphemized, unkempt, and uncivilized representative of humanity—the text takes a tone of utter disgust and unrelenting misanthropy:

I had not gone far when I met one of these Creatures full in my Way, and coming up directly o me. The ugly Monster, when he saw me, distorted several Ways every Feature of his Visage, and stared as at an Object he had never seen before; then approaching nearer, lifted up his fore Paw, whether out of Curiosity or Mischief, I could not tell: But I drew my Hangar, and gave him a good Blow with the flat Side of it (207-08).

There seems to be something remarkably Freudian about the civilized, kept Gulliver and his violent efforts to destroy a "savage" being that is in many ways his mirror image. Swift chooses in this passage words that create a rather ambiguous perspective: could not these same harsh words, perplexed words be delivered from the perspective of Yahoo? Once again, the idea is reinforced that the reader, Swift, and his characters are the same in that they are all sharers of this single and impartial human perspective.

However, to label Swift a misanthrope, and believe that he identifies us all as "Yahoos" is to grossly oversimplify and underestimate the text. Take, for example, the opposite that is given to the Yahoos—the Houyhnhnms. The horses are a cold race that neither rejoices in life's blessings nor mourns life's hard times. They do not harbor warm feelings for their relatives and children. They show no emotion at funerals. It is absurd to believe that the cold reason of the Houyhnhnms, as opposed to the primal desire of the Yahoos, is Swift's answer to the challenges of human life.

Gulliver, during this time, lives allegorically and physically somewhere between the primal Yahoos and the ever-so-calculated Hoyhnhnms. His dwelling is placed exactly between those of the two races, and though Gulliver strives to identify with the horses, his urges stem mainly from pure hatred towards the savage ways of the Yahoos. As readers, we identify this irony, but the true power of Swift's satire is derived from the fact that we do not see similar behaviors in ourselves. The text in Part IV of the book deconstructs itself in this manner, and through Gulliver, Swift seems entirely aware of this deconstruction. On repeated occasions throughout Gulliver's Voyage to the land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver's harsh criticism of the Yahoos reflects perfectly back at him though he remains entirely aloof. In criticizing Gulliver, the reader falls into a similar trap, not realizing that his harsh judgment of Gulliver applies equally well to himself.

If *Gulliver's Travels* is Swift's attempt to convey a message to the reader, his message is delivered through this mechanism of deconstruction. As the classical purpose of travel and pilgrimage is to discover something unknown about one's self in light of the perspective of different cultures, the reader, like Gulliver, is allowed to discover some truth of life by seeing it from the perspective of the highly fallible, highly biased Gulliver. Though no reader can successfully learn from every one of his or her own mistakes, neither can Gulliver and the many, many mistakes and ironies that Gulliver is guilty of providing us with a myriad of opportunities to discover valuable insight. Swift's great gift to the reader is a journey through cultures that practice ways of life neither right, but then again, nor wrong; nor are the responses that Gulliver provides right or wrong. As the reader enters this world through Gulliver, all of these perspectives become, to some extent, part of his or her consciousness, and the reader can begin to look at the intricacies and complications of human life through one more window. Human enlightenment is indeed the great goal of Swift's powerful satirical mechanism in *Gulliver's Travels*, and no misanthrope would dedicate himself to so noble and generous a task.

Conclusion

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift employs a mechanism of deconstruction to convey his message to the reader. By juxtaposing Gulliver's highly fallible and biased perspectives against various cultures, Swift creates a narrative that mirrors the classical purpose of travel and pilgrimage: the discovery of deeper truths about oneself and human nature. The reader, paralleling Gulliver's journey, is afforded the chance to glean insights from Gulliver's numerous mistakes and ironies. This multitude of errors offers a rich tapestry of opportunities for reflection and learning. Swift's great gift to the reader is the exploration of diverse cultures, each with its own flawed yet instructive ways of life, challenging the reader to adopt a more nuanced understanding of human existence. Through Gulliver's experiences, readers assimilate these varied perspectives, enhancing their consciousness and comprehension of life's complexities. Ultimately, Swift's satirical masterpiece aims to promote human enlightenment, revealing a profound dedication to the noble task of fostering greater understanding and wisdom. Contrary to misanthropic tendencies, Swift's work embodies a generous and enlightened approach to examining the human condition.

Notes

ⁱ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Christopher Fox (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995), 28. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are parenthetically incorporated into the text of the paper by page number.

ⁱⁱ This is not to suggest that Swift and Gulliver are totally independent of each other. For details see, Claude Rawson, "Introduction," *Jonathan Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., Claude Rawson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), pp. 1-15. Rawson believes that it is "important to understand that [Swift and Gulliver] are neither the same nor separable, that the one is speaking through the other, sometimes directly, sometimes adversarially, and most often in complex and elusive combination of the two" (14). Also see Nasir Jamal Khattak, *Gulliver's Travels: A Journey through the Unconscious*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation (University of Massachusetts, Amherst, May 2001), pp. 24-34.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is perhaps due to this dynamic that readers have always been divided between the "Soft" and "Hard" schools of critics as James L. Clifford calls them in his "Gulliver's Fourth Voyage: 'Hard' and 'Soft' Schools of Interpretation," *Quick Springs of Sense: Studies in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 33.

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