Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*: A reading

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Abstract

Man has always been seen as a reasonable creature whose actions are the manifestations of reason. As a matter of fact, the dominance of reason has resulted in the establishment of rules and norms that enhanced the superiority of man in general and the Western man in particular during the eighteenth century. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, however, presents us with another picture. This essay will succinctly bring to the forefront this picture and show how Swift excelled in using some rhetorical devices like satire, irony, burlesque, and grotesque to castigate mankind.

Key words: Horacian Satire, Juvenelian Satire, mankind, society, British literature.
Writers are generally sensitive to the pressing issues of their societies. Armed with the power of the word, they all aim at reforming their societies or even whole nations. Due to its reformative power, satire is a suitable means by which a satirist attempts to cure his society. Among eighteenth-century English writers of Satire, Jonathan Swift is an outstanding example. Any Satirist is under pressure to both unveil and hide at the same time since those in power may be tempted to eliminate him. The burning of John Marston’s satires, a century ago, comes into mind. Eighteenth-century England provided Swift with suitable deformities to spell out his satire throughout his masterpiece *Gulliver’s Travels*. It enabled him to display his genius.

A number of changes took place during the last three decades of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century which is better known as the Augustan Age because it is the period which stimulated Jonathan Swift to write *Gulliver’s Travels* and other works. The pace of scientific discoveries continued to accelerate. The success of science particularly associated with the heroic name of Newton inspired thinkers in other fields to employ the inductive experimented methods in a search of a natural law. John Lock’s Essays Concerning Human Understanding follows the Baconian and Newtonian empirical way blazed the trail for the main stream of British philosophy in the eighteenth century. Besides Lock, we may mention David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*. Similarly important is George Cheyne’s Philosophical Principles of Religion in 1715. The list may go on to include names like Halley, Shaftesbury, etc….

The works of these authors contributed to setting the basis for the growth of a new kind of society. In some respects the influence of science on religion was to force Super-Naturalism back from nature to imagination. The aim was to liberate human intelligence from the biblical system of time and space in which earlier men had placed unquestioning faith. As the eighteenth century advanced it became easier to think about nature, society, and human nature in terms of a process instead of a fixed state. During the last decades of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century it seems logical that the political and cultural sphere of this period should be covered if we are to fully understand Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. The before-mentioned domains once studied thoroughly would provide us with ample evidences and clarifications on the forces that drove Swift to write his masterpiece. At this stage we think it is logic to mention briefly the major characteristics of the period under study. The people went through many years of strife and longed for peace. The early years of the eighteenth century were marked by fierce religious disputes which left the church too torpid to cope with the problem created by the activities of the early Evangelists. The aristocratic class made up by the landlords and a growing infusion of moneyed men was the class which controlled the parliament. The division between Whig and Tory corresponded mainly to the church and those who were inclined towards the mercantile, according to Stephen Leslie. We believe that these conditions provided a fertile ground for the satirist to unleash his satire. Satire can only flourish amid such conditions. *Gulliver’s Travels* is undoubtedly satirical throughout.
Satire pertains not only to literature, but to every day utterances. It is conceived as an instrument of reform in the battle against human vice. However, it has not received serious attention from English criticism. As James Sutherland puts it: ‘for one book on satire there are probably half a dozen on comedy and perhaps as much on tragedy.’ There is a common agreement that satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous. The satirist must appear amiable to his audience, hostile only to his enemies. The satirist is too sensible that he cannot turn a blind eye in front of this uncongenial reality. All satirists are endowed with the power to forecast the imminent coming of a new dark age. It has to be pouted out that the Greeks were the first to satire. And it was the Romans who added its derivatives to their native ‘satura’. As such Horace and Juvenal emerge as pillars of Roman satire. Both of them are poets, and both of them embody divergent views on satire. Ronald Paulson sums it up when he says:

The distinction between Horacian and Juvenelian satire is largely one of focus on fool or knave. Horace focuses on the fathers who are hated while Juvenal focuses on the sons who kill their fathers. The fictions they employ are therefore basically different and since most subsequent satire derives from one or the other, they should be clearly distinguished (p21).

Unlike Alexander Pope whose literary heritage sustains a Horacian stance, Jonathan Swift’s satire is Juvenalian in spirit. The grotesqueness of the picture of society and the exaggeration of some human conducts is conveyed in Gulliver’s Travels. According to William K. Wimsatt, Swift’s literary method consists mainly in anatomizing humanity through burlesque, irony, the grotesque, and parody. It would be interesting if we define these terms and relate them to Gulliver’s Travels. However, we are going to leap to the work under study and give the reader an overview of this work. What is it about?

The wickedness of eighteenth century England legitimized Swift’s choice to attack his society vituperatively. Like many satirists Swift chooses Gulliver as satiric personae. *Gulliver’s Travels* is not only a political satire, it belongs also to the Utopian genre. The eighteenth century is known, apart from being the age of reason, as the Golden Age of Utopian fantasy. Whenever the whole fabric of society is collapsing the door is open to dreamers to come up with new alternatives. Thus Swift’s Houyhngnms, who represent benevolence and perfection, emerge from his imagination. Their physical appearance as horses is evidence that he intends them to be beyond earthly representation. The Yahooos are directly paralleled with the loathsome man. Thus, we are in front of two societies a real and an ideal. If we sum up the four Books that make up Gulliver’s Travels we are can succinctly say that Book I, II, and III expose to us men as corrupt, unreasonable, and futile, however, Book IV scrutinizes on the essence of the human race and unveils the common fate of humankind. Swift’s satire embraces the conventional institutions man evolves within. Politics is one of these institutions. The corruption of those in charge makes up the bulk of his satire in Book I. In Book II, we are given an apocalyptic picture of the court. In Book III, Gulliver’s visit to the island of Balinbarbi and more precisely to the Academy of Lagado puts him in front of a fertile ground to display his genius a paradox. Several scholars pointed out that the Academy of Lagado is largely intended as a parody of the Royal Society
established in 1662. Swift’s satire on the relentless qualification of modern science is part of a large suspicion of the project of reason. It so appears that throughout Book I, II, and III Swift charted human absurdities and failings in several societies before reaching conviction about humankind in Book IV. Natural and uncivilized man is the central theme of Book IV. While good qualities are given to the non human form of the horse, bad qualities are given to the nearly human form of the Yahoo.

Unquestionably, *Gulliver’s Travels* is a fascinating book. It appeals to a wide range of readers. I have to admit that this humble essay has only given some hints to the ordinary reader who may venture to read it in full with a critical eye. I hope, as a casual explorer, only whet your appetite to read more on Jonathan Swift and *Gulliver’s Travels* in particular.
References

Primary source(s)


Secondary sources


