

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Ambiguity in Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Krishna Chetry has completed his thesis entitled “**Ambiguity in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*”** under my supervision. He carried out his research from 27th, October 2008 to 30th, July 2009. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for Viva Voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled **Ambiguity in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*** by Krishna Chetry has been submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University. It has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

The ambivalence in Swift's novel is attributable to his life experiences, which itself seems to be flowing in opposite directions. *Gulliver's Travels* is arguably the greatest satiric attempt to shame men out of their vices by constantly distinguishing between how man behaves and how he thinks about or justifies his behavior in a variety of situations. Lemuel Gulliver is a miscast between reality and fantasy. He is on the one hand a novice, an observer, on the other hand he is the teacher, the commentator. This theory delves into Gulliver's character, as a satirical device, and how it serves Swift's ends by being both a mouthpiece for some of Swift's ideals and criticisms.

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I. Swift's Satire on Human Nature

Gulliver's Travels is an anatomy of human nature, a sardonic looking-glass, often criticized for its apparent misanthropy. It asks its readers to refute it, to deny that it has not adequately characterized human nature and society. Each of the four books, recounting four voyages to mostly-fictional exotic lands has a different theme, but all are attempts to deflate human pride.

Gulliver's Travels officially travels into several remote nations of the world, in four parts. It is a novel by [Jonathan Swift](#) that is both a [satire](#) on human nature and a [parody](#) of the travelers' tales literary sub-genre. It is Swift's best known full-length work, and a classic of [English literature](#). Jackie Stall says that Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is:

A complex, uninhibited, savage satire that concludes with the narrator's descent into madness, hardly a likely candidate for children's reading. In the nearly three hundred years since it was first published, however, *Gulliver's Travels* has become associated with children's literature, though it is usually abridged, bowdlerized, and/or totally transformed. (92)

[Gulliver's Travels](#), first published in 1726, is Swift's masterpiece. As with his other writings, the *Travels* were published under a pseudonym, the fictional Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon and later a sea captain. Though it has often been mistakenly thought of and published in bowdlerized form as a children's book, it is a great and sophisticated satire of human nature based on Swift's experience of his times.

Gulliver's Travels is about a specific set of political conflicts, but if it were nothing more than that it would long ago have been forgotten. The staying power of the work comes from its depiction of the human condition and its often despairing, but occasionally hopeful, sketch of the possibilities for humanity to rein in its baser instincts.

Practical knowledge is also satirized when it does not produce results, as in the academy of Balnibarbi, where the experiments for extracting sunbeams from cucumbers amount to nothing. Swift insists that there is a realm of understanding into which humans are simply not supposed to venture.

The idea that humans are not meant to know everything and that all understanding has a natural limit is important in *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift singles out theoretical knowledge in particular his portrait of the disagreeable and self-centered Laputans, who show blatant contempt is a clear satire against those who pride themselves on knowledge above all else.

Chloe Houston's article notes that the novel can also be seen as utopian in its refusal to concede that the ideal society can exist in the real world, and argues that *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift contains:

Images of and interactions with ideas of utopia and dystopia which reflects its engagement with the utopian mode and qualify it as simultaneously utopia and dystopian.

The ideal language schemes and mathematical systems described in *Gulliver's*

Travels are reminiscent of the satire on such practices in John Amos Comenius' *The Labyrinth of the Worm and the Paradise of the Heart*. (429)

His depictions of rational societies, like Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnmland, emphasize not these people's knowledge or understanding of abstract ideas but their ability to live their lives in a wise and steady way. The Brobdingnagian king knows shockingly little about the abstractions of political science, yet his country seems prosperous and well governed.

Similarly, the Houyhnhnms know little about arcane subjects like astronomy, though they know how long a month is by observing the moon. Aspiring to higher fields of knowledge would be meaningless to them and would interfere with their

happiness. It appears that living a happy and well-ordered life seems to be the very thing for which Swift thinks knowledge is useful.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift emphasizes the importance of self-understanding. Gulliver is initially remarkably lacking in self-reflection and self-awareness. He makes no mention of his emotions, passions, dreams, or aspirations, and he shows no interest in describing his own psychology. Jonathan Swift was the most powerful prose satirist of his century.

Accordingly, by the end, he has come close to a kind of twisted self-knowledge in his deranged belief that he is a Yahoo. Swift may thus be saying that self-knowledge has its necessary limits just as theoretical knowledge does, and that if we look too closely at ourselves we might not be able to carry on living happily. At school Swift was not a very good student and his teachers noted his headstrong behavior. When the anti-Catholic Revolution of the year 1688 aroused reaction in Ireland, Swift moved to England to the household of Sir William Temple. He worked there as a secretary but did not like his position as a servant in the household.

Swift lived in England between 1701 and 1704. During his brief time in England, Swift became friends with Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele. During a meeting of their literary club, they decided to write satires of modern learning. In 1704 he published in one volume his first great satires, *A Tale of a Tub*, *The Battle of the Books*, and *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*. Full of brilliant parody and [extravagant](#) wit, these satires exhibit Swift at his most dazzling.

In November 1707 Swift wrote his most distinguished narrative poem, *Baucis and Philemon*, and a few months later he produced one of the finest examples of his [irony](#), the *Argument to Prove That the Abolishing of Christianity in England May, as Things Now Stand, Be Attended with Some Inconveniencies* (1708). In the early

months of 1708 Swift also wrote an amusing piece decrying the quackery of astrologers, *Vindication of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.*

In 1720 Swift published anonymously his *Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufactures*, in which he urged the Irish to discontinue using English goods. Political events once again made Swift a national hero in 1724-1725. His six famous letters, written between April and December 1724 were a protest against English debasement of Irish coinage and the inflation that would ensue.

The Drapier's Letters inflamed all Ireland, caused the cancellation of the [coinage](#) scheme, and made Swift into an Irish hero. The fourth of the six letters, *A Letter to the Whole People of Ireland*, which rose to a pitch of [defiance](#), was labeled seditious, but no one charged Swift, who was known to be the author. The third voyage of *Gulliver's Travels* is assembled from the work Swift did during this time. However, the final work was not completed until 1726, and the narrative of the third voyage was actually the last one completed.

After his return to Ireland, Swift became a staunch supporter of the Irish against English attempts to weaken their economy and political power, writing pamphlets such as the satirical *A Modest Proposal*, in which he suggests that the Irish problems of famine and overpopulation could be easily solved by having the babies of poor Irish subjects sold as delicacies to feed the rich.

In 1695 Swift was ordained in the Church of Ireland, Dublin. While staying in Moor Park, Swift also was the teacher of a young girl, Esther Johnson, whom he called Stella. When she grew up she became an important person in his life. Stella moved to Ireland to live near him and followed him on his travels to London. Their relationship was a constant source of gossips.

Late in life, Swift seemed to many observers to become even more caustic and bitter than he had been. Three years before his death, he was declared unable to care for himself, and guardians were appointed. Based on these facts and on a comparison between Swift's fate and that of his character Gulliver, some people have concluded that he gradually became insane and that his insanity was a natural outgrowth of his indignation and outrage against humankind.

Swift's first major prose play, [*A Tale of a Tub*](#), demonstrates many of the themes and stylistic techniques he would employ in his later work. It is at once wildly playful and funny while being pointed and harshly critical of its targets. In its main thread, the *Tale* recounts the exploits of three sons, representing the main threads of Christianity, who receive a bequest from their father of a coat each, with the added instructions to make no alterations whatsoever.

However, the sons soon find that their coats have fallen out of current fashion and begin to look for loopholes in their father's will which will allow them to make the needed alterations. As each finds his own means of getting around their father's admonition, they struggle with each other for power and dominance. Inserted into this story, in alternating chapters, Swift includes a series of whimsical digressions on various subjects.

Swift's religious writing is little read today. His most famous works include *The Battle of the Books* (1697), exploring the merits of the ancients and the moderns in literature. The author himself pretends to be an objective chronicler of events, but his sympathies are more on the side of the ancients.

In 1729, he published [*A Modest Proposal*](#) For Preventing The Children Of Poor People In Ireland Being A Burden To Their Parents Or Country, And For Making Them Beneficial To The Public, a [satire](#) in which the narrator, with

intentionally grotesque logic, recommends that Ireland's poor escape their poverty by selling their children as food to the rich.

Swift displayed his powers in his *Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Their Country* in 1729. This ironic pamphlet proposed to cure Ireland's [imbalance](#) of people and exports by fattening poor people's children and selling them as delicacies for gentlemen's tables.

A satire on domestics, *Directions to Servants* (1745), followed, and it was succeeded by *Polite Conversation*, written in 1731 and published in 1738. Occasional verse rolled from Swift's pen, but the 1730s were also marked by three important poems: the [delightful](#) *Hamilton's Bawn*, the verses on his own death (1731), and the fierce satire *The Legion Club* (1736). Swift's popularity remained at a high pitch, and he performed his ecclesiastical duties with strictness and regularity. But his [melancholy](#) and his attacks of giddiness increased with his sense of growing isolation and of failing powers.

Contemporary criticism of Swift tended to be guided by the political or religious affiliations of the reviewer rather than the quality of the works themselves. In that combative climate neutral evaluations were difficult to find as personal invective substituted for reasoned argument. These tensions did not evaporate entirely after Swift's death because people continued to read his works in the light of his perceived character, a tendency that was to affect his critical reputation even into the twentieth century.

Gulliver's Travels, published in 1726 and immediately successful. This radical and unstable satire is much more than a tale of dwarfs and giants, raising issues of religion, politics, science, gender and imperialism. Lemuel Gulliver's persona of a

naïve but capable traveler allows a critique of 'civilized' European culture. It is actually a biting work of political and social satire by an Anglican priest, historian, and political commentator.

Anglo-Irish author Jonathan Swift parodied popular travelogues of his day in creating this story of a sea-loving physician's travels to imaginary foreign lands. Structurally, the book is divided into four separate adventures, or travels, which Lemuel Gulliver undertakes by accident when his vessel is shipwrecked or taken over by pirates. In these fantastic tales, Swift satirizes the political events in England and Ireland in his day, as well as English values and institutions. He ridicules academics, scientists, and Enlightenment thinkers who value rationalism above all else, and finally, he targets the human condition itself.

Like all of Swift's works, *Gulliver's Travels* was originally published without Swift's name on it because he feared government persecution. His criticisms of people and institutions are often scathing. Other critics have suggested that while Swift criticized humans and their vanity and folly, he believed that people are capable of behaving better than they do and hoped his works would convince people to reconsider their behavior.

Swift claimed he wrote *Gulliver's Travels* to vex the world rather than divert it. He succeeded in that aim, as the book is considered one of the best examples of satire ever written. Swift's sharp observations about the corruption of people and their institutions still ring true today, almost three hundred years after the book was first published.

Gulliver's Travels was written during an era of change known as the Reformation Period. The way this book is written suggests some of the political themes from that time period, including the well-known satire. These themes are

displayed throughout Gulliver's Travels, and even sometimes reflect upon today's society.

The primary source of observation and analysis will be the text itself. For secondary sources, available critical reading and evaluation from authentic sources on the text and author will be thoroughly studied. This theory will take ideas developed in the field of new historicism as a supportive tool to prove the hypothesis.

The first chapter deals with an introductory aspect of the thesis. The second chapter delves into the theoretical modality that is to be effectively applied in the analysis of the novel. Therefore, it provides an introduction of the tool that is new historicism, and its development. The third chapter of the thesis presents an analysis of the novel at considerable length on the theoretical modality defined and developed in the second chapter. The fourth chapter concludes the research work. Standing on the firm foundation of the analysis of the text done extensively in the third chapter, it tries to prove my hypothesis stated in the thesis proposal.

II. Theoretical Tool: New Historicism

The historical nature of literary works, it was said, had been badly neglected over the past half century of Anglo-American criticism. The time had come to move

beyond the narrowly "formalistic" or "text-centered" approach to literature. A new historical approach was needed and, in the course of events, a new movement arose to meet the demand.

New Historicism is a theory applied to literature that suggests literature must be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. The theory arose in the 1980s, and with Stephen Greenblatt as its main proponent, became quite popular in the 1990s.

The situation in English as the century entered its final two decades was one that placed a greater premium on method than ideas. In addition, there was a rising sense that literary study had reached something of an impasse. On one side were the students of the New Critics, still doing readings of long-accepted texts. On the other, the deconstructionists, showing how texts undo themselves. Both seemed remote from the true interests of the new professoriate, which had cut its teeth on the political slogans of the sixties.

New Historicism was originally used specifically for early modern texts (sixteenth and seventeenth century). New Historicism came under fire when scholars began to think of this as a formal theory. In response, Greenblatt wrote that, rather than being a doctrine, New Historicism is a series of questions and problems. Younger critics were having to resort to a tandem operation, using deconstruction or some other variant of poststructuralist method to clear the ground on which an assortment of radical political notions were carted in to raise a new interpretation.

But such a procedure left critics anxious lest their interpretations fail to go beyond the already familiar readings of the text. It was in this situation that the New Historicism emerged. It appeared to offer a distinctive approach, a rigorous method, along with the opportunity to salvage one's political commitments. Indeed, at times

the New Historicism seemed almost designed to methodize the political interpretation of literature.

The eighties witnessed the emergence of a new movement in Anglo-American literary scholarship which, in methodological sophistication, theoretical all-inclusiveness, and classroom appeal, bid fair to rival anything from Germany and France. The moment was ripe for such a homegrown movement to appear. For several years, many scholars in English and American universities ranging from Frederick Crews, George Watson, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., on one end of the scale to Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Frank Lentricchia on the other, had been raising a clamor for a return to historical scholarship in the academic study of literature.

New Historicism is a very modern critical theory. It was a response to texts being taken completely out of historical context in the early and middle part of the twentieth century. Most New Historicists say that in order to best understand a text, one must look at those texts in historical context. Greenblatt's books *Renaissance Self - Fashioning* (1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) are the exemplary models. Other scholars of Early Modern 'Renaissance' culture associated with him include Jonathan Goldberg, Stephen Orgel, Lisa Jardine, and Louis Montrose. The term has been applied to similar developments in the study of [Romanticism](#), such as the work of Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson. A major concern of new historicism, following Foucault, is the cultural process by which subversion or dissent is ultimately contained by 'power'.

The New Historicist sees texts in terms of how culture is used and valued by the author. At the inception of this theory, hopes were that social issues would be brought to points of prominence. They focus mainly on the political science and anthropological issues as opposed to sociological and economic. New Historicism is

claimed to be a more neutral approach to historical events, and is [sensitive towards different cultures](#). Linking the emergence of New Historicism to that of a corporation, D. G. Myers writes:

Thus the New Historicism in literary study has emerged in this decade not so much in the spirit of counter-insurgency as after the manner of a corporate reorganization. It has been a response not to literature but to literary studies. It has been called forth not by the subject matter under study—not by actual poems, novels, plays—but by the institutional situation in which young scholars now find themselves. (29)

Unlike previous historical criticism, which limited itself to simply demonstrating how a work was reflective of its time, New Historicism evaluates how the work is influenced by the time in which it was produced. It also examines the social sphere in which the author moved the psychological background of the author, the books and theories that may have influenced the author, and any other factors which influenced the work of art. All work is biased.

In addition, New Historicism acknowledges that any criticism of a work is necessarily tinged with the critic's beliefs, social structure, and so on. Most New Historicists may begin a critical reading of a novel by explaining themselves, their backgrounds, and their prejudices. Both the work and the reader are corrupted by everything that has influenced them. New Historicism thus represents a significant change from previous critical theories like New Criticism, because its main focus is to look at things outside of the work, instead of reading the text as a thing apart from the author.

As part of a wider reaction against purely formal or linguistic critical approaches such as the [New Criticism](#) and [deconstruction](#), the new historicists, led by

Stephen Greenblatt, drew new connections between literary and non - literary texts, breaking down the familiar distinctions between a text and its historical ‘background’ as conceived in established historical forms of criticism. Inspired by Michel Foucault's concepts of [discourse](#) and power, they attempted to show how literary works are implicated in the power relations of their time, not as secondary ‘reflections’ of any coherent world view but as active participants in the continual remaking of meanings.

New historicism is less a system of interpretation than a set of shared assumptions about the relationship between literature and history, and an essayistic style that often develops general reflections from a startling historical or anthropological anecdote. Those practicing New Historicism draw from other forms of criticism, particularly the writings of Michel Foucault, who may be more properly termed a psychological critic. Marxist criticism is also a progenitor of New Historicism.

In regards to the relationship between Marxism and New Historicism, it can be said that the New Historicist often looks for ways in which populations are marginalized through a literary work. For example, a Jane Austen novel is a novel confined to a very limited sphere of society, namely the landed gentry. While the New Historicist may praise the novel, he or she will also duly note that the servant class is completely marginalized in Austen’s work. Austen asserts the pre-eminence of the landed gentry above any other class of society, and is quite critical of those who marry “beneath” their social status.

The critic might then evaluate why Austen would display this prejudice, giving information about her background, the books she had read, events in her life that may have influenced her, and her own choices in regards to marriage. Austen is,

in a way, against her own work, which suggests power may be purchased through good marriages, since Austen never married. In fact, Austen's life stands outside her own espoused theories in literature, because she was a female novelist, gaining power through her work rather than through marriage. The whole point of the New Historicist enterprise, Jean E. Howard says:

It is to grasp the terms of the discourse which made it possible for contemporaries to see the facts of their own time in a particular way indeed, made it possible to see certain phenomena as facts at all. At first glance, this objective appears to be little different from that of traditional historical interpretation. The discourse of the past is grasped in its own terms. But what has been subtly introduced is a comparison.

(9)

In its [historicism](#) and in its political interpretations, New Historicism owes something to [Marxism](#). But whereas Marxism tends to see literature as part of a [superstructure](#) in which the [economic](#) base, New Historicist thinkers tend to take a more nuanced view of power, seeing it not exclusively as [class](#)-related but extending throughout society.

In its tendency to see society as consisting of texts relating to other texts, with no 'fixed' literary [value](#) above and beyond the way specific societies read them in specific situations, New Historicism also owes something to [postmodernism](#). However, New Historicists tend to exhibit less [skepticism](#) than postmodernists, and show more willingness to perform the traditional tasks of literary criticism.

New Historicism shares many of the same theories as with what is often called Cultural Materialism, but cultural materialist critics are even more likely to put emphasis on the present implications of their study and to position themselves in

disagreement to current power structures, working to give power to traditionally disadvantaged groups.

Cultural critics also downplay the distinction between high and low culture and often focus predominantly on the productions of popular culture. New Historicists analyze text with an eye to history. With this in mind, New Historicism is not new. Many of the critiques that existed between the 1920s and the 1950s also focused on literature's historical content. These critics based their assumptions of literature on the connection between texts and their historical contexts.

New Historicism frequently addresses the idea that the [lowest common denominator](#) for all human actions is power, so the New Historicist seeks to find examples of power and how it is dispersed within the text. Power is a means through which the [marginalized](#) are controlled, and the thing that the marginalized seek to gain. This relates back to the idea that because [literature](#) is written by those who have the most power, there must be details in it that show the views of the common people. New Historicists seek to find sites of struggle to identify just who is the [group](#) or [entity](#) with the most power.

Foucault's conception of power is neither reductive nor synonymous with domination. Rather he understands power as continually articulated on knowledge and knowledge on power. His discussions of techniques included the [panopticon](#), a theoretical [prison](#) system developed by English philosopher [Jeremy Bentham](#), and particularly useful for New Historicism.

Foucault included the panopticon in his discussions on the technologies of power in part to illustrate the idea of lateral [surveillance](#), or self-policing that occurs when those who are subject to these techniques of power believe they are being watched. His purpose was to show that these techniques of power go beyond mere

force and could prompt different regimes of self-discipline among those subject to the exercise of these visibility techniques. Complimenting [Michel Foucault](#) for his contribution to the development of New Historicism, Catherine Belsey writes:

New Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural as well as to investigate the intellectual history and cultural history through literature. The approach owes much of its impetus to the work of [Michel Foucault](#), who based his approach both on his theory of the limits of collective cultural knowledge and on his technique of examining a broad array of documents in order to understand the episteme of a particular time. Using Foucault's work as a starting point, New Historicism aims at interpreting a literary text as an expression of or reaction to the power-structures of the surrounding society. (144)

Although the influence of such philosophers as French structuralist Marxist [Louis Althusser](#) and Marxists [Raymond Williams](#) and [Terry Eagleton](#) were essential in shaping the theory of New Historicism, the work of Foucault also appears influential. Although some critics believe that these former philosophers have made more of an impact on New Historicism as a whole, there is a popularly held recognition that Foucault's ideas have passed through the New Historicist formation in history as a succession of épistèmes or structures of thought that shape everyone and everything within a culture.

It is indeed evident that the categories of history used by New Historicists have been standardized academically. Although the movement is publicly disapproving of the periodization of academic history, the uses to which New

Historicists put the Foucauldian notion of the *épistème* amount to very little more than the same practice under a new and improved label.

New historicism has suffered from criticism, most particularly from the clashing views of those considered to be [postmodernists](#). New Historicism denies the claim that society has entered a post-modern or post-historical phase and allegedly ignited the [culture wars](#) of the 1980s.

The main points of this argument are that new historicism, unlike post-modernism, acknowledges that almost all historic views, accounts, and facts they use contain biases which derive from the position of that view. Some complaints sometimes made about New Historicism are that it seems to reduce literature to a footnote of history. It has also been said that it does not pay attention to the details involved with analyzing literature. New Historicism simply states historical issues that literature may make connections without explaining why it has done this, lacking in-depth knowledge of literature and its structures.

Within the ranks of the New Historicism, literature is considered to be one of the social forces that contribute to the making of individuals. It acts as a form of social control. Although most New Historicists are scrupulous to distinguish themselves from Marxist critics, the fact remains that the central task of the New Historicism is the same as that of Marxist criticism.

First to call into question the traditional view of literature as an autonomous realm of discourse with its own problems, forms, principles, activities, and then to dissolve the literary text into the social and political context from which it issued. In fact, the New Historicism tries explicitly to solve the theoretical difficulty in Marxist criticism of relating the cultural superstructure to the material base. Its claim to

newness might be put in terms of its claim to having solved that problem. John Brannigan talks about historicism and modernism and says:

Historicism also often challenged the concept of truth and the notion of rationality in modernity. Modern thinkers held that reason was a universal faculty of the mind that is free of interpretation that can grasp universal and unchanging truth. Historicism questioned this notion of rationality and truth, and argued for the historical context of knowledge and reason; historicism is an explicit formulation of the historicity of knowledge. (79)

New Historicism movement establishes itself upon four main contentions. First literature is historical, which means that a literary work is not primarily the record of one mind's attempt to solve certain formal problems and the need to find something to say. It is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it, therefore, is through the culture and society that produced it. Second literature is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to history, which means a particular vision of history.

Third, like works of literature, man himself is a social construct, the sloppy composition of social and political forces. There is no such thing as a human nature that transcends history. Renaissance man belongs inescapably and irretrievably to the Renaissance. There is no continuity between him and us; history is a series of "ruptures" between ages and men. Fourth as a consequence, the historian is trapped in his own "historicity."

No one can rise above his own social formations, his own ideological upbringing, in order to understand the past on its terms. A modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries experienced it. Given this fact, the best a

modern historicist approach to literature can hope to accomplish is to use the text as a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology.

Although the movement represents itself as being more faithful to the true, hitherto-neglected nature of literature, in reality its key assumptions are derived from the institutional milieu in which it arose. Its concepts and categories are simply those which, over the last few years, have conditioned a large part of the literary thought within the university. Thus, the New Historicism is critical of the enabling presumptions of its more distant, but not of its more immediate, predecessors.

The New Historicist effort to assimilate the literary text to history is guaranteed by the poststructuralist doctrine of textuality, which states that the text is not aloof from the surrounding context. That there is contiguity, an ebb and flow, between text and whatever might once have been seen as outside it. Yet these ideas are obtained secondhand. They are not established by original inquiry or argument. They are simply the precipitate of an academic climate in which a plurality of meanings is recognized as offering the greatest good for the greatest number of literary scholars, and in which the reassimilation of text to context is the goal of practically everybody.

The doctrine of historicity is a Heideggerian motif that came to the movement via the writings of German hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. The New Historicist conception of ideology is not that of Marx, but rather that of the French structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser. The New Historicists seem more directly influenced by expositors of Marxist doctrine like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton than by Althusser. In its general orientation toward scholarship and historical research the New Historicism dances attendance on the figure of the late Michel Foucault.

The influence of Foucault is a generalized and secondhand one. It permeates the New Historicist conception of history as a succession of *épistèmes* or structures of thought that shape everyone and everything within a culture. But this is no more than to say that Foucault has provided New Historicists with their own *épistème*. Their work cannot really be said to extend or elaborate upon Foucault's. Nor is it critical of Foucault's concept of the *épistème*. It merely embraces the concept as a given. Lynn Hunt argued that events in history are unique and cannot be repeated and says that:

To understand the event, one must leave one's present context of understanding and view it from the historical context of that event.

Hermeneutics is art of interpreting the historical contexts of events in human life. Experience is essentially interpretive and rationality is also socially and historically contextualized and conditioned. (139)

In New Historicist interpretation, as a consequence, history is not viewed as the cause or the source of a work. Instead, the relationship between history and the work is seen as dialectic. The literary text is interpreted as product and producer, end and source, of history. Among literary critics, new historicism has something in common with the historical criticism of [Hippolyte Taine](#), who argued that a literary work is less the product of its author's imaginations than the social circumstances of its creation. The three main aspects of which Taine called race, milieu, and moment.

It is also a response to an earlier historicism, practiced by early twentieth century critics such as John Livingston Lowes, which sought to de-mythologize the creative process by reexamining the lives and times of canonical writers. But New Historicism differs from both of these trends in its emphasis on [ideology](#): The political disposition, unknown to an author himself that governs his work. One undeniable side benefit of such a view is that history is no longer conceived, as in

some vulgar historical scholarship, as a thing wholly prior, a process which completes itself at the appearance of the work. At the same time, though, it must not be thought that the New Historicism dispenses with the cognitive category of priority.

For the New Historicist it is ideology, not history, which is prior. The literary text is said to be a constituent part of a culture's ideology by virtue of passing it on. The ideology nevertheless exists in a form separate from the work. If it didn't, the critic could not discern a relationship between work and ideology and if the ideology were not prior to the work, it wouldn't be a historical relationship.

But the apriorism of ideology in New Historicist thought raises large questions. How does the critic know that the ideology located in the work of literature under discussion genuinely belongs to the past? How can he be sure that the ideology is not simply his own political sympathy which has been injected into the work and then located there by means of an ingenious selection of the evidence? These questions occur spontaneously to anyone who reads very widely in New Historicist writing, so much of which expresses sympathy for exploited peoples, powerless women, workers, slaves, and peasants.

The error of the New Historicism lies not in its political allegiances, but in the logic of its method. That method might be described as a way of salvaging initially favored hypotheses in the face of a lack of concrete evidence. Two main objections to such a procedure come to the fore. First, we may simply disagree with the conviction that has inspired the argument in the first place. We may not happen to agree that it is a *prima facie* likelihood that all of the men within any given culture have sought to oppress the women or that those who express contempt for peasants are expressing the ambivalence of a wish-fulfillment fantasy.

And if we disagree, no amount of evidence about the discursive practices of the age will persuade us otherwise. The very choice of what to quote in corroboration of this view will be made on the basis of the conviction that it is true. Only if a reader of a New Historicist argument is prepared to accept its *a priori* assumptions can its conclusions be accepted as true to history. The essential categories of New Historicist thought make the necessary facts appear. Talking about the differences between New Historicism and Cultural Studies, Jane Tompkins writes:

New Historicism also shares many of the same theories as with what is often called Cultural Studies, but cultural critics are even more likely to put emphasis on the present implications of their study and to position themselves in disagreement to current power structures, working to give power to traditionally disadvantaged groups. (14)

The New Historicist sees facts that the people of the time did not, and this special insight is what enables him to grasp the discursive practices that produced the facts that the people did see. But there remains a question. How can the New Historicist be certain that this second set of facts is not merely produced by the discursive practices of his own time?

Surely the terms in which he explains the past representations, subversiveness, cultural presence, etc. belong to no age so much as his own. They are to be numbered among the discursive practices of the recent academic past. How then does the New Historicist know that the facts which show up so clearly in his interpretive framework can also be found in the distant past? If he can never escape his own historicity, how can the New Historicist know for certain that those "facts" exist at all?

New Historicism is strikingly unphilosophical about these and other problems of knowledge raised by its methods of interpretation. Movement writers never explain

how it is that, though we are unable to recover the original meaning of a literary text, we are nevertheless able to reconstruct its original ideology. Nor do they account for why, though we cannot experience a text from an earlier age as its original readers would have experienced it. Wesley Morris says:

History, for the New Historicist, is not an objective affair, but a series of rhetorical negotiations between texts and events which of necessity includes some persons, experiences or events to the exclusion of others. But New Historicism is not simply a matter of letting oppressed voices speak. (217)

New historicism has come into conflict with some of the anti-historical tendencies of [postmodernism](#). New historicism denies the claim that society has entered a post-modern or post-historical phase and allegedly ignited the culture wars of the 1980s. The main points of this argument are that new historicism, unlike post-modernism, acknowledges that almost all historic views, accounts, and facts they use contain biases which derive from the position of that view.

Some complaints sometimes made about New Historicism are that it seems to lessen literature to a footnote of history. It has also been said that it does not pay attention to the antiquate details involved with analyzing literature. New Historicism simply states historical issues that literature may make connections with without explain why it has done this, lacking in-depth knowledge to literature and its structures.

What the New Historicism offers to students of literature is the joy of new explanations, new paradigms. It does not designate an unexplored area of scholarly investigation. It does not raise new problems, new questions. If its attempts to "historicize" literary study were merely an inducement to look into new kinds of

documents, to ask about the relation of literature to social history in a new way, the movement would perform a service for scholarship. The New Historicism cannot be considered a new subspecialty within the discipline of English in the same sense as the older subspecialties of textual criticism or Renaissance studies. The specialization is not a disciplinary but a bureaucratic one. It seeks to establish a new jurisdiction in a reorganized university.

New Historicists like to picture themselves as challenging the institution of criticism breaking loose from the extremely narrow confines of literary study as it is now practiced within the academy. In reality, however, the movement is another step toward the reconfinement of literary study. Jobs are created for New Historicists and space in the critical journals is set aside for their essays. As academic decisions are increasingly made on the basis not of scholarly competence but of methodological affiliation, the pressure on younger scholars and graduate students to enlist in the movement becomes enormous.

In conclusion, New Historicism is not a genuine historical inquiry. It does not inquire into the true nature of literary works, because it is confident it already knows what they are. They are agents of ideology. Contrary to appearances, the movement is not an effort to discover what it means for a literary work to be historical. It is really little more than an attempt to get literary works to conform to a particular vision of history. For the university as a whole the movement represents a further stage in literary scholarship's progressive abandonment of literature.

III. Ambiguity in *Gulliver's Travels*

Gulliver's Travels is arguably the greatest satiric attempt to shame men out of their vices by constantly distinguishing between how man behaves and how he thinks about or justifies his behavior in a variety of situations. Pride, in particular, is what enables man to deceive himself into the belief that he is rational and virtuous when, in reality, he has not developed his reason, and his virtue is merely appearance.

Lemuel Gulliver is a miscast between [reality](#) and fantasy. He is on the one hand a novice, an observer. On the other hand he is the teacher, the commentator. Gulliver starts every voyage from the real land and ends up in an imaginary land. After experiencing and suffering a lot, he returns to the real land, but always in a changed stature. He is a pretender who suffers from multiple personality.

One of the forms of ambiguity is embodied in the first culture that is met by Gulliver. The Lilliputians are the embodiment of England of the time period. England was a small country that had Europe (represented by Gulliver) and many other parts of the world under their control. Describing the Lilliputians, Swift writes:

They suppose truth, justice, temperance, and the like, to be in every man's power; the practice of which virtues, assisted by experience and a good intention, would qualify any man for the service of his country, except where a course of study is required. But they thought the want of moral virtues was so far from being supplied by superior endowments of the mind, that employments could never be put into such dangerous hands as those of persons so qualified. (49)

Swift systematizes his novel in such an articulating way that almost all the dates, places, characters, or [events](#) find a firm basis in reality. Every moment of Gulliver is subject to some purpose. Swift's purpose was to stir his readers to view themselves as he viewed humankind, as creatures that were not fulfilling their potential to be truly great but were simply flaunting the trappings of greatness. *Gulliver's Travels* succeeds in this goal brilliantly.

This example of comparing the political situation in Europe at the time to the story is further demonstrated by using Gulliver against the Blefescan nation, much like a European nation would use a political ally. The Lilliputians are small people

who control Gulliver through means of threats:

When in an instant I felt above a hundred arrows discharged into my left hand, which pricked my like so many needles; and besides they shot another [flight](#) into the air, as we do bombs in Europe, whereof many, I suppose, fell on my body and some on my face, which I immediately covered with my left hand. (6)

The form and structure of the novel enhanced Swift's purpose, as did the specific metaphors in each of the four voyages. Firstly, Swift went to great pains to present *Gulliver's Travels* in the genuine, standard form of the popular travelogues of the time. Gulliver, the reader is told, was a seaman, first in the capacity of a ship's surgeon, then as the captain of several ships.

In his letter to his Cousin Sympson he mentions that his Yahoo natures have returned in him. Thus, he becomes incoherent. Swift accentuates self-contradiction in his character. Decoding this ambivalence can unveil Swift's intention of organizing *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift, in turns, attacks mankind's vanities, follies, cruelties, and morals. The floating island crushing the lower island is the best attack on England's merciless domination of Ireland as:

Besides, as it is in the power of the monarch to raise the island above the regions of clouds and vapours, he can prevent the falling of dews and rains whenever he pleases. For the highest clouds cannot rise above two miles, as naturalists agree, at least they were never known to do so in that country. (170)

Swift creates a realistic framework by incorporating nautical jargon, descriptive detail that is related in a log style, and repeated claims by Gulliver, in his narrative. This framework provides a sense of realism and verisimilitude that contrasts sharply with

the fantastic nature of the tales, and establishes the first ironic layer of the novel.

Lemuel Gulliver at the beginning of his narrative describes his odyssey at sea:

By an observation, we found ourselves in the latitude of 30 degrees and 2 minutes south. Twelve of our crew were dead by immoderate labour and ill food, the rest were in a very weak condition. On the fifth of November, which was the beginning of summer in those parts, the weather being very hazy, the seaman spied a rock, with half a cable's length of the ship; but the wind was so strong, that we were driven directly upon it, and immediately split. (4)

During the Reformation period, people were beginning to question superstitions and theories by using science to explain things. The most famous of these explanations was when Halley discovered that a comet made a predictable orbit around the sun. During the voyage to Laputa, Gulliver commends the Laputians on their study of comets, even saying that:

It is much to be wished that their observations were made public, whereby the theory of comets, which at present is very lame and defective, might be brought to the same perfection with other parts of astronomy. They have observed ninety-three different comets, and settled their periods with great exactness. (174)

But then, on his voyage to Lagodo, he emphasizes on the multiple scientists engaging in trivial experiments such as trying to extract sunlight from a cucumber. By this passage, Swift means to attach the scientific community's need to analyze everything, as they did at that time, mainly to prove superstitions wrong.

All the four voyages begin with Gulliver in multifarious conditions. In the first voyage he is cast away, next he is a leftover, in the third he is detoured, and in the

final voyage he is marooned. Whatever the situation is, he shows apathy towards his companions in the ships. The four books of the *Travels* are also presented in a parallel way so that voyages 1 and 2 focus on criticism of various aspects of English society at the time, and man within this society, while voyages 3 and 4 are more preoccupied with human nature itself.

As such, the overall structure also works like a spiral leading to a center of self-realization. Swift's satire shifts from foreign to domestic scenes, from institutions to individuals, from mankind to man, from others to ourselves. However, all of these elements overlap, and with each voyage, Gulliver, and thus the reader, is treated not only to differing but ever deepening views of human nature that climax in Gulliver's epiphany when he identifies himself with the detestable Yahoos. Swift writes:

To instruct the Yahoos of my own family as far as I shall find them docile animals; to behold my figure often in a glass, and thus if possible habituate myself by time to tolerate the sight of a human creature; to lament the brutality of Houyhnhnms in my own country, but always treat their persons with respect, for the sake of my noble master, his family, his friends. (315)

An indifferent comment about them leads the readers to the conclusion that Gulliver is passive, a recluse, or, tends to be so. That is why his honesty which comes to question by the time the travelogue ends shows that he is concerned with himself. Swift presents the *Travels* in an apparently conflicting pattern. After landing in an island in the southern hemisphere in the first voyage, Gulliver describes the land in a way, which kindles aesthetic awareness among the readers:

When I found myself on my feet, I looked about me, and must confess I never beheld a more entertaining prospect. The country round

appeared like a continued garden, and the inclosed fields, which were generally forty foot square, resembled so many beds of flowers. These fields were intermingled with woods of half a stang, and the tallest trees, as I could judge, appeared to be seven foot high. I viewed the town on my left hand, which looked like the painted scene of a city in a theatre. (14)

The same description turns to an awe, rather a nightmare, with the leviathan images of the flora and fauna in Brobdingnag. The third voyage is beyond any idyllic approach. The fourth voyage, which is the climax of Gulliver's self-struggle for psychological survival, is full of disgust. The natives' nature in all these places induces the innateness of Gulliver. Still, he remains inconclusive and unaffected.

Gulliver's ambiguity is all the more visible when he fails to sort out his moral depravity in Brobdingnag as well as in Houyhnhnmland. His indigenous identity now disappears, he is now universalized. He does not have any clear knowledge about what he is. He also fails to locate the horses' brutality towards the Yahoos, which were deprived of their own culture and tradition. Rather, his misinterpretation of the Houyhnhnm manner shows his degeneracy to an extent to question Gulliver's person.

Houyhnhnm apartheid towards Gulliver forces him to leave their land. He suffers from further setback. He desperately needs to know what he is. But once banished, he misses the last boat. This uncertainty of identity makes him cocooned. His snobbish attitude to remain aloof from the so-called Yahoos makes him an escapist from society, from human beings. He calls the stark naked people "Natives" (249) and the Portuguese sailors not "European or English Yahoos", but "Seamen" and "honest" (250).

Still, back in England, the English are all Yahoos. His detestation for the Yahoos is so deep that he even cannot bear his [wife](#) and children, who are hardly mentioned in his narrative. Being a so-called Yahoo, Gulliver's abhorrence for the other Yahoos and devotion to the Houyhnhnm race put him nowhere. In the concluding part of the novel he contemplates by saying:

I began last week to permit my wife to sit at dinner with me, at the farthest end of a long table, and to answer the few questions I ask her. Yet the smell of a Yahoo continuing very offensive, I always keep my nose well stopped with rue, lavender, or tobacco leaves. And although it be hard for a man late in life to remove old habits, I am not altogether out of hopes in some time to suffer a neighbour Yahoo in my company, without the apprehensions I am yet under of his teeth or his claws. (315)

The isolation from humanity that he endures for sixteen years must be hard to bear, though Gulliver rarely talks about such matters. Yet despite the courage Gulliver shows throughout his voyages, his character lacks basic greatness. This impression could be due to the fact that he rarely shows his feelings, reveals his soul, or experiences great passions of any sort.

The way he treats others is objectionable. But he seems to be callous. He is an amoebic character, confining himself within a [cell](#) from the rest of the world and trying hard to get accustomed to the pathway of his course. He is the Captain of his own ship *Pride*.

This quandary of adjustment is unlike the earlier voyages. In the first and the third voyages, after his return, he takes things normally. After returning from the

second voyage, he is much caring about others. But after the final return, he is a different person, who has a high nose and suffers from personality.

As a result, he remains alone, away from all human company. The horses banish him from their land. But he banishes himself from his family, from the rest of the society. He is alienated. The last voyage is thus unique with its characteristic of escape mechanism. What seems most lacking in Gulliver is not courage or feelings, but drive. He is simply devoid of a sense of mission, a goal that would make his wandering into a quest. However, he is happy that his odyssey has:

I confess it was whispered to me that I was bound in duty as a subject of England to have given in a memorial to a Secretary of State at my first coming over; because whatever lands are discovered by a subject belong to the Crown. The Lilliputians I think are hardly worth the charge of a fleet and army to reduce them; and I question whether it might be prudent or safe to attempt the Brobdingnagians; or whether an English Army would be much at their ease with the flying Island over their heads. (312)

The choice of metaphor in each voyage serves more particularly the various points of Swift's ambiguous vision. The effect of reducing the scale of life in Lilliput is to strip human affairs of their self-imposed grandeur. Ranks, politics, international war, lose all of their significance.

This particular idea is continued in the second voyage, not in the picture of the Brobdingnagians, but in Gulliver himself, who is now a Lilliputian. And where the Lilliputians highlight the pettiness of human pride and pretensions, the relative size of the Brobdingnagians, who do exemplify some positive qualities, also highlights the

grossness of the human form and habits, thus satirizing pride in the human form and appearance.

Gulliver's goal on his sea voyage is uncertain. He says that he needs to make some money after the failure of his business, but he rarely mentions finances throughout the work and indeed almost never even mentions home. He has no awareness of any greatness in what he is doing or what he is working toward.

In short, he has no aspirations. When he leaves home on his travels for the first time, he gives no impression that he regards himself as undertaking a great endeavor or embarking on a thrilling new challenge. His reason for his journey at sea was:

My business began to fail; having therefore consulted with my wife, and some of my acquaintance, I determined to go again to sea. I was surgeon successively in two ships, and made several voyages, for six years, to the East and West-Indies, by which I got some addition to my fortune. My hours of leisure I spent in reading the best authors, ancient and modern, being always provided with a good number of books; and when I was ashore, in observing the manners and dispositions of the people, as well as learning their language, wherein I had a great facility by the strength of my memory. (3)

Swift attributes alienation upon Gulliver to show that human being is not a creature that has reason, but a creature that can use that reason if he opts. When he understands and applies that reason properly, he becomes a perfect person. Otherwise, he is either a Yahoo, or a Houyhnhnm. Gulliver has become a victim so that his perspective can be founded on a logical conclusion.

In the voyage to Laputa, the actual device of a floating island that drifts along above the rest of the world metaphorically represents Swift's point that an excess of

speculative reasoning can also be negative by cutting one off from the practical realities of life which, in the end, doesn't serve learning or society.

And in the relation of the activities of the Grand Academy of Lagado, Swift satirizes the dangers and wastefulness of pride in human reason uninformed by common sense. The final choice of the Houyhnhnms as the representatives of perfect reason unimpeded by irrationality or excessive emotion serves a dual role for Swift's ambiguity.

Gulliver, in a sense, becomes Swift's puppet, and a mirror of his time. He feels chained and humiliated by the invisible silk of the Lilliputians, but fails to react accordingly. Even the alleged indictment of him about Flimnap's [wife](#) fails to provoke a protest from Gulliver. Happenings like this are abundant in the opening voyage, where English politics, along with Irish and French intrigues are colossal in the guise of Lilliput, Blefuscu, the Kings, the Queens and other court people.

Gulliver the individual turns universal in the last voyage, where he faces the dilemma of identity, what he is. Parallel to Brobdingnag is Houyhnhnmland where Gulliver is almost ripped of his own reason by the stunning reasons of the natives. In both the places he stays willingly and leaves them reluctantly. And when he comes back to England, he tries to segregate himself, one way or other, from the rest of the society, being proud of his sense of reason, which is now much developed. Swift satirizes the existing tradition and suggests innovations prudently as he hides behind his protagonist and says:

I was chiefly disgusted with modern history. For having strictly examined all the persons of great name in the courts of princes for an hundred years past, I found how the world had been misled by prostitute writers, to ascribe the greatest exploits in war to cowards, the

wisest counsel to fools, sincerity to flatterers, Roman virtue to betrayers of their country, piety to atheists, chastity to sodomites, truth to informers. How many innocent and excellent persons had been condemned to death or banishment, by the practicing of great ministers upon the corruption of judges, and the malice of factions. (207)

The absurdity of a domestic animal exhibiting more humanity than humans throws light on the defects of human nature in the form of the Yahoo, who look and act like humans stripped of higher reason. Gulliver and the reader are forced to evaluate such behavior from a vantage point outside of man that makes it both shocking and revelatory.

The pride in human nature as superior when compared to a bestial nature is satirized sharply. However, the Houyhnhnms are not an ideal of human nature either. Swift uses them to show how reason uninformed by love, compassion, and empathy is also an inadequate method to deal with the myriad aspects of the human situation.

Much of the first voyage lampoons court intrigue and the arbitrary fickleness of court favor. The rank and favor of the Lilliputian ministers being dependent on how high they can jump over a rope literally illustrates this figurative point:

For as to that infamous practice of acquiring great employments by dancing on the ropes, or badges of favour and distinction by leaping over sticks and creeping under them, the reader is to observe, that they were first introduced by the grandfather of the Emperor now reigning, and grew to the present height by the gradual increase of party and faction. (49)

The two political parties being differentiated by the height of their heels points out how little substantive difference there was between Whig and Tory and similarly, the

religious differences about whether the Host was flesh or symbol is reduced to the petty quarrel between the Big-Indians and the Small-Indians. Gulliver himself falls out of favor because he does not pander to the King's thirst for power.

Swift also highlights the pretensions of politics by informing the reader of some of the laudable and novel ideals and practices of Lilliputian society such as rewarding those who obey the law, holding a breach of trust as the highest offense, and punishing false accusers and ingratitude, but shows that, like humans, even the Lilliputians do not live up to their own standards when they exhibit ingratitude for Gulliver's help and accuse him of high treason. Gulliver's description of the Lilliputian society is as:

They look upon fraud as a greater crime than theft, and therefore seldom fail to punish it with death; for they allege, that care and vigilance, with a very common understanding, may preserve a man's goods from thieves, but honesty has no fence against superior cunning; and since it is necessary that there should be a perpetual intercourse of buying and selling. (48)

Most of the social and political criticism occurs in Chapters six and seven. Gulliver describes European civilization to Brobdingnag's King, including England's political and legal institutions and how they work, as well as some of the personal habits of the ruling class. One such habit was:

It was a custom introduced by this prince and his ministry that after the court had decreed any cruel execution, either to gratify the monarch's resentment, or the malice of a favourite, the Emperor always made a speech to his whole Council, expressing his greater lenity and tenderness, as qualities known and confessed by all the world. (63)

Yet, even though Gulliver subsequently confesses to the reader that he cast this information in the most favorable light, the King still deduces that every strata of society and political power is infested with rampant corruption and dismissively concludes, “the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth” (66).

This echoes a basic message of the first voyage but the attack here is more direct and corrosive. The relative size of the Brobdingnagians adds a physical dimension to the King's judgment and enhances its veracity. Also, all the transactions of life, all passion, and all social amenities, which involve the body, lose their respectability in Brobdingnag, from Gulliver's description of the odious breast to his viewing of a public execution as:

Although I abhorred such kind of spectacles, yet my curiosity tempted me to see something that I thought must be extraordinary. The malefactor was fixed in a chair upon a scaffold erected for the purpose, and his head cut off at a blow with a sword of about forty foot long. The veins and arteries spouted up such a prodigious quantity of blood, and so high in the air, that the great *jet d'eau* at Verasilles was not equal for the time it lasted; and the head, when it fell on the scaffold floor, gave such a bounce, as made me start, although I were at least half an English mile distant. (116)

In contrast, Brobdingnagian society has many things to recommend it such as excellence in morality, history, poetry, and mathematics; although Gulliver ironically laments that these are only applied to the practical aspects of life and not used for abstractions.

However, much of Swift's political writings indicate that he, like the Brobdingnagians, favored a conception of government and society based on common-sense. The supreme moment of ironical criticism of European civilization occurs in Chapter seven when, after offering the secret of gun powder to the King and his subsequent horrified refusal, Gulliver declares the King to possess narrow principles and short views:

The King was struck with horror at the description I had given of those terrible engines, and the proposal I had made. He was amazed how so impotent and groveling an insect as I could entertain such inhuman ideas, and in so familiar a manner as to appear wholly unmoved at all the scenes of blood and desolation, which I had painted as the common effects of those destructive machines, whereof he said some evil genius, enemy to mankind, must have been the first contriver. (134)

Gulliver's offer of the secret of gunpowder only underscores that he is a typical member of his race. From Gulliver's theme of the excellence of mankind, begun in Chapter six, the episode concludes with the shocking demonstration of what man's inhumanity is capable of.

Mankind would never be so short-sighted as to turn away from learning a new method of injuring, torturing, or killing one's fellows. Aside from this sharp comment on human nature, Swift is also alluding to the eagerness with which European nations would leap at such an offer as an aid to waging war against their neighbors.

The main focus of social criticism in the voyage to Laputa is on intellectuals, such as scholars, philosophers, and scientists, who often get lost in theoretical abstractions and conceptions to the exclusion of the more pragmatic aspects of life, in direct contrast to the practical Brobdingnagians. Swift was satirizing the strange

experiments of the scientists of the Royal Society, but may also have been warning his readers against the political projectors and speculators of the time.

The Laputians excel at theoretical mathematics, but they can't build houses where the walls are straight and the corners are square. Instead, they constantly worry about when the sun will burn out and whether a comet will collide with the earth. This misuse of reason is hilariously elaborated on in Chapters five and six, where the various experiments occurring at the Grand Academy of Lagado are described.

Gulliver professes his sincere admiration for such projects as extracting sunbeams from cucumbers and building houses from the roof down. The ambiguity in voyage three attacks both the deficiency of common sense and the consequences of corrupt judgment. Most of the criticism in the Voyage to the Houyhnhnms is directed at human nature itself. Swift makes some very cogent observations on imperialism in the concluding chapter which point out the arrogance and self deception of European nations when they claim to civilize, through brutality and oppression, groups of indigenous people who were often mild and harmless.

Swift implies, the real goal of imperialism is greed. The most ironic point occurs when the author disclaims that this attack on imperialist countries does not include Britain, which history shows was equally as brutal as its European rivals and, in many cases, even more so, considering its Empire became at one time the largest of any European country.

Chapter seven of the first Voyage, where Gulliver is informed that he is about to be indicted for high treason by the Lilliputian Court, provides the most bitter attack on hypocrisy, ingratitude, and cruelty. Yet Gulliver, and the reader, is able to distance themselves from these qualities by concluding that though these tiny creatures are aping human behavior, they are still not human like the trial:

I sometimes thought of standing my trial, for although I could not deny the facts alleged in the several articles, yet I hoped they would admit of some extenuations. But having in my life perused many state trials, which I ever observed to terminate as the judges thought fit to direct, I durst not rely on so dangerous a decision, in so critical a juncture, and against such powerful enemies. (64)

In the second voyage, both the human pride in physical appearance is attacked through Gulliver's perspective of the Brobdingnagians, and Gulliver's own pride in himself and his country is reduced to ridiculousness as Gulliver becomes the object of comic ridicule.

One of the most interesting comments on the human condition is the description of the immortal Struldbrugs in Voyage Three. Swift's treatment of the subject of immortality is characteristically practical and down to earth. What would it really be like to live in perpetuity? His answer: A living death. The main problem is that the human body ages and is not a fit vessel to house a perpetual consciousness. In relating this episode, Swift affirms with cutting precision that we have much in common with the rest of earth's creatures. Any superior reason we may possess, and the pride we take in it, does not exempt us from the natural laws of physical death and regeneration.

In Book Three, Swift not only shows the possible perversions of reason in the doings at the Academy of Lagado, but also shows its limitations in shielding us from the natural consequences of physical life. Here, he implies the importance of a moral structure to human life. Reason is not enough and immortality would only make things worse.

Book four seems to argue that reason is the one quality, when properly developed that can elevate man to his ultimate potential. But actually, it is the horse-like Houyhnhnms that possess this perfect development of reason, whereas the Yahoos, whom Gulliver most resembles, are primitive and bestial. Voyage four contains Swift's clearest attack on human pride.

Upon the whole, the behavior of these animals was so orderly and rational, so acute and judicious, that I at last concluded they must needs be magicians, who had thus metamorphosed themselves upon some design, and seeing a stranger in the way, were resolved to divert themselves with him; or perhaps were really amazed at the sight of a man so very different in habit, feature and complexion from those who might probably live in so remote a climate. (236)

Indeed, the quality of reason only enables humans to aggravate their natural corruptions and to acquire new ones which Nature had not intended. Even a dispassionate view of human history would find it difficult to dispute this conclusion. The object of the satiric attack in the last voyage is man himself.

The Houyhnhnms possess reason and benevolence, and selfish appetites and brutish awareness are left for the Yahoos. The microscopic analysis of the human form that took place in the second voyage is now used to analyze the defects of man's moral nature, and it is pride that prevents man from recognizing his flaws and dealing with them. When Gulliver experiences the shock of recognition that he, too, is a Yahoo, Gulliver passes from being perfect example character acting in ignorance of his condition to experiencing a terrifying insight into evil which is accompanied by all the bitterness of a profound disillusionment.

We are meant to be repulsed by the chilling calmness with which the Houyhnhnms accept death as described in Chapter nine as much as we are by the selfishness of the Yahoos, and it is clear Swift does not present Gulliver's comic and absurd withdrawal from people as a viable solution. Narrating the life pattern of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver says:

They live generally to seventy or seventy-five years, very seldom to fourscore: some weeks before their death they feel a gradual decay, but without pain. During this time they are much visited by their friends, because they cannot go abroad with their usual ease and satisfaction. However, about ten days before their death, which they seldom fail in computing, they return the visits that have been made them by those who are nearest in the neighbourhood, being carried in a convenient sledge drawn by Yahoos. (291)

Instead, Swift wants us to be shocked out of the pride that allows us to deceive ourselves into thinking man is completely virtuous when he is not by experiencing, with Gulliver, our own limitations without making Gulliver's final mistake. The solution to the human dilemma is not as simple as Gulliver's rejection of humanity. Swift's final success in terms of stimulating response is that, after masterfully dissecting and presenting the problem, he leaves the application of his lessons to the judicious reader.

Gulliver's Travels is in a sense, a tragic work in that it is the picture of man's collapse before his corrupt nature, and of his defiance in face of the collapse. Yet, obviously Swift felt that humbling human pride, enabling a more honest self-assessment, was absolutely vital to addressing the suffering and injustice so prevalent in human life. Contrary to many who label Swift a misanthropist, only a man who

cared deeply about humanity could have produced a work like *Gulliver's Travels*.

Wielding the scalpel of ambiguity, Swift cuts through our self-deception to our pride, the source of our moral denial and inertia.

Along with Gulliver through the voyages, Swift brilliantly peels away our pretensions, layer by layer, until he shows us what we are and challenges us, intensely and urgently, to be better. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift continues to vex the world so that it might awaken to the fact that humankind needs saving, but it has to save itself.

IV. Conclusion

The ambiguity in *Gulliver's Travels* is human nature itself, specifically Man's pride as it manifests in pettiness, grossness, rational absurdity, and animality. Gulliver's character, as a satirical device, serves Swift's ends by being both a mouthpiece for some of Swift's ideals and criticisms and as an illustration of them.

Although Gulliver is a bold adventurer who visits a multitude of strange lands, it is difficult to regard him as truly heroic. Even well before his slide into misanthropy at the end of the book, he simply does not show the stuff of which grand heroes are made. Swift's classic satire of English and European governments, societies, and cultures should be required reading of every college student.

Gulliver is not cowardly. On the contrary, he undergoes the unnerving experiences of nearly being devoured by a giant rat, taken captive by pirates, shipwrecked on faraway shores, sexually assaulted by an eleven-year-old girl, and shot in the face with poison arrows. Jonathan Swift wrote this amazing story in 1726. It was a political and social satire exposing the ways that man sinned against the dear sight of nature and goodness.

Gulliver's Travels describes the four fantastic voyages of Lemuel Gulliver, a kindly ship's surgeon. Swift portrays him as an observer, a reporter, and a victim of circumstance. His travels take him to Lilliput where he is a giant observing tiny people. In Brobdingnag, the tables are reversed and he is the tiny person in a land of giants where he is exhibited as a curiosity at markets and fairs. The flying island of Laputa is the scene of his next voyage. The people plan and plot as their country lies in ruins. It is a world of illusion and distorted values. The fourth and final voyage takes him to the home of the Houyhnhnms, gentle horses who rule the land. He also encounters Yahoos, filthy bestial creatures who resemble humans.

Gulliver provides us only with literal facts and narrative events, never with any generalizing or philosophizing. He is a self-hating, self-proclaimed Yahoo at the end, announcing his misanthropy quite loudly, but even this attitude is difficult to accept as the moral of the story. Gulliver is not a figure with whom we identify but, rather, part of the array of personalities and behaviors about which we must make judgments. That feature is the ambiguity in the novel.

Gulliver's Travels is an anatomy of human nature, a sardonic looking-glass, often criticized for its apparent misanthropy. It asks its readers to refute it, to deny that it has not adequately characterized human nature and society. Each of the four books recounting four voyages to mostly-fictional exotic lands has a different theme, but all are attempts to deflate human pride. Many things in the book *Gulliver's Travels* prove that it was set in the Restoration Period. Some of the ways are the clothing, the speech, the governments, and the lack of technology. But these things do not prove that the book was written in the Restoration Era.

Critics hail the work as a satiric reflection on the failings of Enlightenment modernism. *Gulliver's Travels* is one of those books that will remain a classic because it portrays some universal issues that will continue to have effects on people's lives in the future. Critiques on human nature are made through Gulliver's observations as well as through Gulliver's own transformation from a naive individual into a wise and skeptical misanthrope.

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