

# Socio-Political Significances of the Use of Fantasy: A Study of Gulliver's Travels

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**Abstract**—Fantasy, a literary genre, creates fictional worlds that resonate with reality by incorporating supernatural elements. It is characterized by non-rationality, a connection to reality, and the ability to evoke wonder, offering an escape from harsh realities and serving as wish fulfilment. Fantasy often utilizes symbols, dreams, myths, and images, possessing its own logic that readers must engage with. While not always humorous, fantasy approaches reality with a "willing suspension of disbelief" and can be a vehicle for satire. Jonathan Swift effectively employs both fantasy and satire in *Gulliver's Travels* to critique society and human vices. This paper focuses on how Swift uses fantasy to expose the Enlightenment's view of humans as purely rational beings, particularly challenging British Empiricism and its coercive power mechanisms. Through distorted lenses, Swift uses Augustan satire not merely to tell a fairy tale, but to reveal political truths to the common reader.

**Index Terms**—Fantasy, Satire, Gulliver's Travels, Socio-Political, supernatural

## I. INTRODUCTION

Fantasy is particularly well situated to provoke a historical experience. Fantasy presents readers with a fictional world that relates to some extent to our own world. While distinct from reality, fantasy incorporates supernatural and fantastical elements to make it feel real. Fantasy stands on three pillars: non-rationality, relation to reality, and evoking wonder. It is easily relatable to all sections of people, providing an opportunity to escape from harsh realities and serving as apparent wish fulfilment, offering alternative experiences. Fantasy deals with symbols, dreams, myths, and images. It possesses its own logic and reality, which readers must relate to; otherwise, fantasy becomes isolated and fails to reach its audience.

Humor can be present in fantasy, depending on rational and irrational elements, but not all fantasy aims to be humorous or provoke laughter. It generally approaches reality with a temporal suspension, known as "willing suspension of disbelief". Irwin implicitly places fantasy within the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, marking play as "separate from the ordinary," temporarily rejecting and replacing it.

Sometimes, fantasy is used to portray societal vices and follies through satire. Satirization can be achieved through various forms like pictures, cartoons, poetry, and films, where ethical ruptures become subjects of ridicule. Swift employs both fantasy and satire in *Gulliver's Travels* to depict society, human beings, and their vices and follies. This paper primarily focuses on Jonathan Swift's

*Gulliver's Travels*. In "A Voyage to Lilliput" (Book One), Swift's techniques are familiar, akin to cartoons, as Gulliver encounters comic physical exaggerations in Lilliput. Satire should target genuine flaws. Swift presents

*Gulliver's Travels* in the form of a mock travel book. Swift exposes the Enlightenment values of the 17th and 18th centuries, where human beings were considered, rational creatures driven solely by reason, situating the pursuit of science and exploration of nature as the sole domain of European supremacy. As an Irishman, Swift critiques the coercive mechanisms of power that sustain the apparently rational discourses of British Empiricism, where a dominant group exploits others while claiming scientific rationality and enlightenment as advancements for human civilization. To grasp irrationality, Swift uses distorted lenses to view reality, much like comedy uses exaggeration to convey flaws. Swift adapted Augustan satire. His aim in using fantasy is not merely to narrate a fairy tale but to make ordinary readers aware of political aspects and truths.

A. Topographical Terrain

The depiction of topographical terrain is an important element in crafting the fictive fabric of fantasy. This active envisioning of geographical and architectural space has been a crucial component of post-renaissance narratives. Frances Yates, in

*The Art of Memory* (1996), traces how topographical spaces were associated with mapping human consciousness in Renaissance humanist and Enlightenment traditions. In the works of Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, such figurations often charted socio-political changes by reconstructing ideological paradigms through a "republic of letters". More's

*Utopia* presented a fascinating illustration of "the no place of the Erasmian Republic". These elaborations provided impetus for Swift's creation of fantastical lands in

*Gulliver's Travels*, making its topographical arrangement and description a vantage point for his subversive and satirical projectiles.

John C. Hawley refers to the theorizations of John Huntington and Paul Ricoeur regarding the essential connection between ideology, subversion, and the depiction of temporal sites in utopian narrative. The theme of an ideal utopia contrasting with a dystopia runs through

*Gulliver's Travels* from the very first voyage to Lilliput. The Fourth Book presents an ambivalent picture of a country Gulliver wants to represent as a utopia, yet irony is present. Gulliver, as a second narrator after the author, portrays the Houyhnhnm society as a natural ideal, where inhabitants live in a state of nature without written language (transmitted orally), where there is no lying, perfect discipline under the control of reason, and where friendship and benevolence are principal virtues.

Gulliver is attracted by the gentleness and goodness of the Houyhnhnms, leading him to stay with them and follow them blindly, hating the human-like Yahoos. Here, Gulliver compares man to animals, which is difficult to accept, as he keeps Yahoos as domestic servants and load-bearers. If Houyhnhnm rationality is as sharp as Gulliver describes, they could devise ways to civilize Yahoos to some extent, rather than deeming them "unteachable". They keep Yahoos backward, even attempting to castrate them and planning to banish Gulliver on the anticipation he might side with them. The solutions offered by the Houyhnhnms are impressionistic rather than rational. Furthermore, their

benevolence is shown only towards their own race. They are cruel to Yahoos, using their skin for leather, and indifferent to Gulliver, despite his prolonged stay, readily banishing him. Ultimately, Pedro De Mendez exhibits more Houyhnhnm-like qualities than the Houyhnhnms themselves.

It is incorrect to make sweeping judgments about any of the lands Gulliver visits. Some lands are more negative, but all have aspects of both utopia and dystopia. After Gulliver's mentally unbalanced return home from the fourth voyage, the question remains whether anyone would prefer to live in Houyhnhnm land and be happy there. This question prevents it from being regarded as a utopia.

#### B. Exaggeration of Corporal Form

The body and its transformation serve as an important site for weaving fantastical narratives. Fantasy not only presents exotic, deformed, and inexplicable bodies but also depicts radical bodily transformations as strategic plot points. Judith Butler discusses how social hierarchies are reaffirmed through a hierarchy of bodies, shaping hegemonic knowledge production. In fantasy, bodily transformations that break natural rules act as loci of subversion and re-appropriation of these hegemonic discourses. These "incorporations," as Eva Cherniavsky coins them, are intimately associated with the imagining of race, nation, and gender within the body politics unfurled in the age of capital.

Swift's

*Gulliver's Travels* engages in discourses concerning the politics of the body. We encounter giants, dwarfs, and zoomorphic forms. Discussions of food, feeding, and excrement are also relevant, as they highlight issues of control, authority, and agency.

In Gulliver's first voyage, he provides a detailed account of Lilliput, its people, and their society. Women are introduced later, described in a conventional manner regarding child-rearing. In female nurseries, young girls were taught to be like males. The queens and their maids of honor are only mentioned, not encountered. We learn about the great lady in Lilliput, the treasurer Flimnap's wife, who he is possessive about. Overall, Book 1 offers concrete pictures of females but lacks positive feelings.

In Brobdingnag (the second voyage), women are shown in a negative light. The only female Gulliver truly loves is Gulmdalclitch. His first encounter with a woman is the farmer who finds him and takes him

home. Gulliver finds all the giants of Brobdingnag extremely ugly, viewing them with their faults. He describes the nurse's breast with disgust: "I must confess no object ever disgusted me as much as the sight of her monstrous Breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with.... It stood prominent six-foot, and could not be less than sixteen in circumference. The nipple was about half the Bigness of my head, and the Hue both of that and the Dug so verified with spots, pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous..."

A similar description of a woman's breast is seen with a beggar woman on the street: "The most horrible spectacles that ever a European eye beheld. It is the sight of a woman with a cancer in her breast, which has 'swelled to a monstrous size, full of holes, in two or three of which he could easily have crept'". Gulliver compares these women to English ladies with fair, smooth skin, feeling nauseous at their eating habits. He describes the Queen's eating: "For the Queen ... took up at one mouthful, as much as a dozen English farmers could eat at a meal, which to me was for some time a very nauseous sight. She would craunch the Whig of a lark, bones and all, between her teeth, although it was nine times as large as that of a full-grown Turkey; and put a Bit of Bread in her Mouth, as two twelve-penny Loaves".

This illustrates Gulliver's experiences with a series of women: he is repulsed by the "very offensive smell" from the Brobdingnagian maids' skin in their dressing rooms, disgusted by a female Yahoo's "offensive smell", and finds his own wife's "very smell" intolerable at the end of Book 4. Gulliver possesses an eye and nose for the ugly, particularly concerning women. He describes the maids of honor: "would strip themselves to the skin.... while I was placed on their Toylet directly before their naked bodies; which, I am sure, to me was very far from a tempting sight... Their Skins appeared as coarse and uneven... with a Mole here and there as broad as a Trencher, and Hairs hanging from it thicker than pack-threads; to say nothing further concerning the rest of their persons".

The third voyage is to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudrib, and Japan. In Laputa, Gulliver is confused by the people's oddness: tilted heads, one eye turned inward and the other looking up, indicating their detachment from reality. Their clothes are adorned with celestial bodies and musical instruments. The symbols and motifs in the third book, such as the

depiction of excrement, are similar to the first two. Here, Swiftian satire exposes how the pursuit of human knowledge diverged from ordinary life. While 18th-century Enlightenment philosophers viewed human beings as noble and rational, Swift emphasizes their physical filth and irrationality.

When Gulliver suffered from colic, a physician in the Academy attempted to relieve his pain with bellows, first to pull air from the anus and then to push it back. After witnessing the experiment performed on a dog, which died, Gulliver decided to endure the pain without medicine. A second instance in the Academy of Lagado involved a projector whose sight stunned Gulliver: "I went into another chamber, but was ready to hasten back, being almost overcome with a horrible stink, my conductor pressed me forward, conjuring me in a whisper to give no offense, which would be highly resented; and therefore, I durst not so much as stop my nose. The projector of this cell was the most ancient student of the academy. His face and beard were of a pale yellow; his hands and clothes dabbled over with filth. When I was presented to him, he gave me a close embrace, (a compliment I could well have excused). His employment from his first coming into academy, was an operation to reduce human excrement to its original food, by separating the several parts, removing the tincture which it receives from the gall, making the odour exhale, and summing off the saliva". In the fourth voyage, we encounter zoomorphic forms in the land of Houyhnhnms. The creatures from the first and second voyages can be seen as oppositional. Book one features dwarfs compared to Gulliver, while the second features giants. The third and fourth books are connected by their focus on the impracticality of science and its irrelevance to Swift's homeland. In Book Four, rationality is treated entirely differently from the voyage to Laputa. Houyhnhnms (horse), whose name sounds like "whinnies," and the homophonous similarity to "human" result in humanoid creatures, while Yahoos are represented as irrational.

Gulliver's initial experience with Yahoos is unpleasant; he considers them dirty, vulgar, and unruly. He is soon tormented by Yahoos throwing excrement at him from trees. Conversely, Gulliver is greatly impressed by the Houyhnhnms' rationality and good sense. Gulliver provides a detailed account of the Yahoos: variations in skin and hair color, nose and face shape, thick hair on their heads and chests, a line

of hair on their backs, and some around their anal area, with the rest being "brown buff color". They have strong, pointed claws on both fore and hind limbs. Each Yahoo can see other bodies but not their own, leading to hatred among them. The master horse explains their eating habits: "For if you throw among five yahoos as much as food as would be sufficient for fifty, they will, instead of eating peaceably, fall together by the ears, each single one impatient to have it all to itself". They wound each other with their claws. Yahoos exhibit an unnatural appetite and love for intoxicating wine, which makes them "hug, tear one another, haul, grin, chatter, reel, tumble, then fallen asleep in the mud". Their medicine is obnoxious: "a mixture of their cow dung and urine, forcibly puts down to yahoo's throat". They are omnivorous, devouring "Herbs, roots, berries, the corrupted flesh of animal", while Houyhnhnms are natural eaters, maintaining cleanliness.

According to Gulliver, the way female Yahoos attract males is curious. They gaze from behind a bank or bush, making gestures and grimaces, and emit an offensive smell. Upon success, they run away, pretending fear, to a convenient place for the male to follow.

To summarize this section, the book can be divided into little men, big men, Houyhnhnms, and Yahoos. Gulliver is positioned between the tiny and the giant. In Lilliput, he encounters people hardly six inches high, and in Brobdingnag, he encounters giants. Gulliver is "within three yards of his eyes" and dangles "in the air above sixty foot from the ground". Thus, he is both Lilliputian and giant:

LILLIPUTIANS ← GULLIVER → BROBDINGNAGIANS  
Physically similar? Yes Yes  
Morally, socially, politically similar? As himself - no  
In actions - no

In capability - yes As humanity - yes

The physical and moral tension found in Book One and Two is absent in Book Three. Gulliver is never physically in danger in Laputa, and he feels no tension regarding his identity, unlike in Lilliput and Brobdingnag. Similar tension is present in Book Four, where he is trapped physically, emotionally, and rationally:

YAHOO ← GULLIVER → HOUYHNNHMS  
Physically - emotionally Similar? YES NO  
Rationally - morally Similar? NO IN ACTIONS - NO  
IN CAPABILITY - YES

Let us summarize the discussion on human excrement, which appears in all four books and which Swift satirizes. In Book One, Gulliver urinates on the queen's palace to extinguish a fire, which is seen as his valuing the pride of the Lilliput king and queen. In Book Two, Brobdingnag is appalled by the huge amount of urine and excrement produced by the giants, whose stench is exaggerated by Swift in a disgusting way. In the third book, Laputa, a scientific researcher spends twenty years attempting to convert excrement back into consumable food, becoming covered in human dung, demonstrating how degraded human beings can become in pursuit of scientific knowledge. In the fourth book, the land of Houyhnhnms features Yahoo excrement, filth, and nastiness, while Houyhnhnms are extremely clean. Excretion and ingestion, the apprehension of eating and being eaten, shape the fantastical terrain of Swift's narrative.

#### C. Notion of Supernatural

The presentation of the supernatural in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* stems from Swift's philosophical theories about human nature and society. Frances Yates, in

*The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, discussed how "diabolical apparatus" in Renaissance plays and books was associated with descriptions and critiques of contemporary society. E.J. Clery discusses how, in the 18th century, humanist paradigms transformed into a rich trove of supernatural fiction. Clery traces the intimate connection between supernatural fiction and the growth of industrial capitalism, noting that spectral visitations in 18th-century fiction often reflected the "disruptive effects" of socio-economic transformation. While her discussion primarily focuses on the latter half of the 18th century, presagings of this tradition are seen in Swift's

*Gulliver's Travels*. For Swift, the rise of capitalism and the spread of imperialism signaled a major disruption, revealing problematic aspects of human nature. It is relevant that 20th-century magic realism foregrounded these disruptions, explicitly revealing the intricate connection between the supernatural and politics.

*Gulliver's Travels* is a good example of gothic fantasy and supernaturalism. Swift uses supernatural creatures, talking horses, and Yahoos. Gulliver stands between both giant and dwarf. Supernatural images deal with social and psychological implications.

Gothic images depict hierarchical order and political structure, with both gigantic and diminutive things contributing to the gothic and supernatural. Gulliver's fantastic descriptions provide a fantastic view, with a strong focus on the body along with the imagined fantasy of Gulliver's world. Gulliver's body threatens the entire Lilliputian system, causing fear despite his non-fearful physical appearance.

Swift wittily uses the character of Gulliver, who is alienated from the human world and readers, encountering different characters in unknown nations followed by nightmarish incidents. We are introduced to every small detail about Gulliver. Swift creates an enigmatic fantasy using this technique, extending fantasy to gothic images and supernaturalism, such as immortality found in the people of Luggnagg. Magical incidents are also present in the small island of Glubbdubdrib, which has an extremely closed community of magicians where marriage occurs within their group, and the eldest becomes the governor. This governor, a necromancer, possesses the power to call up dead bodies and keep them as servants for one day, with the rule that the magician cannot call the same person again. Gulliver encounters a ghost for the first time. The text not only emphasizes Swift's satire but also functions as a gothic fantasy.

*Gulliver's Travels* provides sublime fantasy associated with political and social criticism of human beings. It contributes to gothic fantasy by introducing new possibilities beyond conventional gothic modes in terms of imagination, multiple plots, characters, settings, and names. In this sense,

*Gulliver's Travels*, with its satirical transformations, brings new connections to gothic fantasy. This aligns with Day's characteristics of gothic fantasy in

*In the Circles of Fear and Desire*: "The gothic fantasy is the intermediary between the world it describes and the conventional world, which is fundamentally different in form and structure". Day further explains that the Gothic World, the world beyond death in gothic fantasy, lacks its own form or shape. It is unknowable in conventional terms, made manifest through "translation," where the unnamable and unknowable are given names and forms through conventional narrative language. Gothic fantasy describes a world without characters, actions, or plots in those terms; it defines only the comprehensible part of the underworld.

The gothic and supernatural imagery aligns with the political satire embedded in the text. Gulliver's gigantic body instills fear in the Lilliputians because it appears exotic, fearful, and strange, different from their physical bodies. The fear of the body as gothic is deeply rooted in mythology and gothic fantasy. Gulliver's massive body not only threatens the Lilliputian political and social system but also causes fear of the entire nation's destruction. This fear for the Lilliputians stems from the physical power inherent in the body. They are uncomfortable with the large, strange body in their land because it seems dangerous and fearful, foreshadowing changes in their society's social and moral structure.

Hinnant refers to this fear, stating, "Seen from this perspective, the first voyage maybe read as an ironic fable of a society riddled by fear, its theme the baleful consequences of this fear on its laws and institutions. The theme is reflecting not only in the pretty intrigues, jealousies, and rivalries and conflicts of the Lilliputians, but also in the inflexibility of their taboos on bodily discharges, taboos that reflect their obsessions concerning the entrance of dangerous impurities into their system. In Swift's satire the model of the human body becomes a doubly appropriate symbolic focus for the anxieties of the Lilliputians concerning a violent faction at home, and the danger of an invasion by a most potent enemy from abroad". It is important to note that

*Gulliver's Travels* is not merely fantasy and fiction, but it also conveys cultural and social messages about human anxieties. It is like a journey into an unconscious dream that represents worries about human physical life and the intellectual aspect of human existence. As Day observes, "The gothic fantasy is a realm created by the human imagination, into which the human imagination retreats. Nevertheless, it also represents the alienation of the human imagination from its own products. To escape anxiety and terror, the imagination creates fantasies of anxiety and terror; the experiences that cause our alienation reappear in our escapes from it. The human world dramatized in the gothic fantasy is a history less, order less abyss. Thus, not only is the human world alienated from the visions of science and myth, but it is also profoundly self-alienated. In gothic fantasy, the human imagination can only externalize the fears it finds in itself".

D. Societal Relationship

Swift recognized the ambiguity of "slavery": it can be a biological imperative, a natural condition of inherent servility, or a political accident imposed by oppressors. Swift repeatedly characterized the Irish as "slaves" and highlighted Ireland's relationship to England as "slavery". He feared that Irish slavery, initially external oppression, would become an intrinsic part of the Irish character. Applying Swift's observations on Irish slavery to the Yahoos' slavery to the Houyhnhnms in Book IV of

*Gulliver's Travels*, the question of whether slavery is nature or nurture arises, as there is evidence suggesting Yahoos were as rational as Gulliver upon their arrival in Houyhnhnm land.

The Carnival, also known as the feast of fools, is now better known as Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras is a religious celebration where people consume vast amounts of food and wine and have a large party. The grotesqueness in carnival is seen in the abundance of food consumed by the body. Much emphasis is placed on the mouth, as it is a point of entry to the body. Eating, drinking, and burping from excess are all mouth-related activities. Rabelais uses the Carnival to refer to politics and critique the world based on human anatomy. In the Italian celebration of Carnival, masks play a major role, often featuring enlarged facial elements like an enlarged nose, which are part of the grotesque body. The Italian Carnival is similar to Mardi Gras, with excessive consumption of food and alcohol.

#### E. Grotesque Realism

Exaggeration, hyperbole, and expressiveness are key elements of the grotesque style. Certain bodily aspects are referenced when discussing the grotesque, including elements that protrude from or allow entry into the body. This is because the body is often seen as pure, unlike the outside world. Therefore, body parts that allow external elements in or internal elements out are used to exaggerate the grotesque.

In "Absurdity and Hidden Truth: Cunning Intelligence and Grotesque Body Images as Manifestations of the Trickster," Koepping refers to Bakhtin's statement: "The themes of cursing and of laughter are almost exclusively a subject of the grotesqueness of the body". Italian satirist Daniele Luttazzi explained that "satire exhibits the grotesque body, which is dominated by the primary needs (eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, and sex) to celebrate the victory of life: the social and the corporeal are joyfully joint in

something indivisible, universal and beneficial". Bakhtin explained how the grotesque body celebrates the cycle of life, being a comic figure of profound ambivalence: its positive meaning linked to birth and renewal, and its negative meaning linked to death and decay.

In Rabelais' epoch (1500–1800), it was appropriate to ridicule kings and clergy using dung and urine for degradation. This was not just mockery; it was, as Bakhtin saw it, a way to unleash the people's power to renew and regenerate the entire social system. It was the power of the people's festive-carnival, a way to invert the official spectacle temporarily to impress the participating official stratum. With modernity (science, technology, industrial revolution), the mechanistic overtook the organic, and officialdom no longer joined in festive-carnival. The bodily lower stratum of humor bifurcated from the upper stratum.

Mikhail Bakhtin's four categories of the carnivalesque sense of the world are:

- Familiar and free interaction between heterogeneous people.
- Eccentric and non-normative behavior.
- Carnivalistic misalliances between apparently oppositional categories.
- Profanation of sacrality.

Through carnival and carnivalesque literature, a "world upside-down" is created, where ideas and truths are endlessly tested and contested, and all demand equal dialogic status. The "jolly relativity" of all things is proclaimed by alternative voices within the carnivalized literary text that de-privilege the authoritative voice of the hegemony through their mingling of "high culture" with the profane. For Bakhtin, literary forms like the novel are sites of resistance to authority and places where cultural and potentially political change can occur.

For Bakhtin, carnivalization has a long and rich historical foundation in ancient genres. In Menippean satire, the three planes of Heaven (Olympus), the Underworld (Hades), and Earth are treated with the logic and activity of Carnival. For example, in the underworld, earthly inequalities dissolve; emperors lose their crowns and meet beggars on equal terms. This intentional ambiguity allows for the "polyphonic" novel, where narratological and character voices are free to speak subversively or shockingly, without the writer stepping between character and reader.

To maintain societal norms, society's norms are broken. Norms are man-made and can be unmade. Laws regarding sexual relationships within immediate family, for instance, are societal norms, whereas nature often dictates the opposite. There is an inversion in social hierarchy. Gulliver's sneezing creates a tempest, an exaggeration that focuses on food habits and the grotesque body.

## II. CONCLUSION

Fantasy as a literary genre is often considered a domain of childish innocence and mere entertainment. However, as Tzvetan Todorov pointed out, the generic significance of fantasy lies in its historical role as a repository of satire, possessing both satirical and literary functions. Swift's

*Gulliver's Travels* is a fascinating work that structurally aligns with Todorov's central thesis of using the uncanny in fantasy as a site for negotiating the non-normative and the marginalized. The utopian function of imaginary worlds is particularly adept at facilitating these negotiations. Furthermore, the depiction of the body as a site of subversion has become one of the most distinguishing traits of Swift's fiction.

Rosemary Jackson has enunciated that fantasies are often wrongly interpreted as escapist texts. In reality, they are narratives with profound psychological connections to unconscious drives, charting the inner recesses of human socio-political and sexual subversions. This dissertation is a humble effort to examine Swift's work from this perspective. The use of the supernatural in the work is not merely sensationalist but contributes to a potent subversive commentary on his contemporary times. Swift emerges as a rebel whose deep motivations for subverting the dominant discourses of English Imperialism unleashed a plethora of fantastical terrains and bodily forms. These were not simply exercises in misanthropy but carefully chosen and powerfully used vantage points for unfurling his socio-political convictions.

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