

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) *Gulliver's Travels* (A, 974-1113)

Jonathan Swift, a posthumous child, was born of English parents in Dublin in 1667. Through the generosity of an uncle, he was educated at Kilkenny School and Trinity College. About 1696-7, he wrote his powerful satires on corruption in religion and learning, which were published in 1704 and reached their final form in the fifth edition in 1710. At age thirty-two, he returned to Ireland where he devoted his talents to politics and religion, and his works in prose were written to further various political causes (971).

*Gulliver's Travels* is Swift's most enduring satire. Although full of allusions to recent and current events, it still rings true today, for its objects are human failings and the defective political, economic, and social institutions that they call into being. Swift adopts an ancient satirical device: the imaginary voyage (975). The structure of his narrative also mirrors the travelogues and explorationist diaries that were very popular in the centuries following encounter with the Americas, and the ensuing colonial efforts.

*Question: What is the Secret of Gulliver's Travels' Lasting Fascination for us?*

At the time of Swift the European discovery of far distant lands and cultures was far under way. Columbus had come upon a new world, and Montaigne reflected the excitement of that discovery well over a century before Swift's time. Swift taps into the growing fascination with the travel narrative, and puts it to use both to satirize his own culture—especially through the Houyhnhnms—and to fantasize the adventures of Lemuel in relation to other worlds and attitudes. In other words, this set of Gulliver tales is full of self awareness and analysis. Gulliver is in each tale set off from the people he discovers, by size or personal traits. *Does the unique charm of Swift's presentation come down to a kind of inner social geometry each of us carries inside, by which we are intrigued by seeing and feeling events from different angles?*

*Comparative Literature:*

1. We have gone into the issue of taste changes from one period to another of English literature. In the 19th century, which was on the whole scornful of 18th century British literary styles, Swift was even more reviled than Pope or Dryden. Thomas de Quincy, in the mid 19th century, wrote that "*the meanness of Swift's nature, and his rigid incapacity for dealing with the grandeurs of the human spirit, with religion, with poetry or even with science when it rose above the mercenary practical, is absolutely appalling. His own Yahoo is not a more abominable one-sided degradation of humanity than he himself is under this aspect. . .*" I think you see that Swift's scatological imagination, his scorn for social traditions, his mocking of human pretenses all goes against the grain of thinking which flies under the "Romantic" banner? You might want to enlarge your sense, of this Classical/Romantic polarity, by checking out Irving Babbitt's scholarly classic, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919).