

## **HIDDEN TRUTHS IN JONATHAN SWIFT'S GULLIVER'S TRAVELS**

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**Abstract:** The paper presents an approach to the literature based on an analysis of three factors: the historical reader, the historical author, and the informed reader. By applying synchronic and diachronic methods of reading, an acceptable critical reading of a literary work is proposed. The paper aims to explain the functioning of all three factors through the interpretation of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The result of the interpretation is the discovery of the truth about the true nature of colonialism, which is still relevant today. At the same time, the paper shows the importance of applying the appropriate methodology in the study of literature as a way of achieving and preserving its autonomy in relation to the other humanities.

**Keywords:** literary method, historical reader, historical author, informed reader, Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*

### **Introduction**

A sustainable literary interpretation comes as a result of the interplay of at least three factors: the historical reader, the historical author, and the present (informed) reader. This taxonomy is not prescriptive, but descriptive. An acceptable interpretation should take into account the significance of the literary work at the time of its creation, but also its present significance. The first two factors are based on the knowledge of the specific literary and historical context. The third implies language and literary competence and relates to the current context and the practices of reading. The third factor is particularly significant because it encompasses and binds together the previous two. The informed reader must not be *late to the party*, he must be familiar with the most important previous interpretations of the given text. Literary competence is an indispensable part of good critical practice. The criterion the contemporary, informed reader, leaves the possibility to

include the latest approaches in the interpretation or even approaches yet to emerge.

We will proceed to examine these three factors in the case of Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Besides the fictional author, the text is characterized by "the scrambling of fact and fiction, and the parody of various kinds of writing" (Fox 1995a, 14). The text also encompasses different styles and types of literature, "including spiritual autobiography, conversion narrative, travel tale, imaginary voyage" (Fox 1995a, 14-15), and characteristics of the scientific text. Immediately upon release, the novel attracted great critical attention and was perceived as extremely contemporary work. Swift's novel, in perhaps slightly different ways, is still relevant for today's readers.

### **The Historical Reader**

A historical reader is an individual or group of readers who read a text in its historical context. Reader-response criticism or even plain historicism have a practice of reading texts in their historical context to understand the way they had been received by their earliest readers. Historical readers have been studied as "social groups, as in Ian Watt's consideration of the role played by the reading public in the rise of the British novel, or the work of Hans-Robert Jauss" (Nelles 24).

The historical reader is not a "virtual reader" (Prince 180) – the reader imagined by the biographical author while writing his work. We reach the historical reader through his texts that speak of a certain literary work, in a certain period. The historical reader is limited by the historical context, stylistic and genre conventions to which the interpreted work belongs, and therefore has the advantage of recognizing the specific literary context. For example, Clement Hawes recognizes thematic similarities between Swift's work, and travel writing that supported colonialism. The main targets of Swift's satire – "travel literature, adventure novels, illustration, ethnography, cartography, and science" – were implicated by "colonial discourse" (Hawes 188).

By the time the novel was published, Swift was already known as an author whose texts had a political connotation, and his book was received as a "decidedly political document and was both understood and used as a contribution to the political journalism of the opposition" (Goldgar 50). For Swift's contemporaries parallels were drawn "between the Low Heels and the Whigs and the High Heels and the Tories" (Fox 1995b, 270). Especially the Whigs and their prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole, connected with the character Flimnap in Lilliput.

The early reception of *Gulliver's travels* is perhaps most fully described by Swift's cousin, Deane Swift (1707–1783). In his *Essay Upon*

*the Life, Writings, and Character of Jonathan Swift* (2nd ed., 1755) he asserted, that the work is “a direct, plain and bitter satire against the innumerable follies and corruptions in law, politicks, learning, morals and religion” (Fox 1995b, 274). He saw the first two parts of the novel as “intirely political”, and as a satire of “the wars of Europe and the factions of WHIG and TORY” (Fox 1995b, 274).

Therefore, contemporaries found an analogy between the two warring nations, Lilliput and Blefuscu on the one hand and Britain and France on the other. They noticed the satirical nature of Swift’s discourse and the political implications of *Gulliver’s travels*.

### **The Historical Author**

The historical author is not a biographical author, because obviously everything that is happening in the author’s life is not important for understanding the literary text. Today the notion of any author is mostly excluded from the field of literary research. This was done first by introducing *intentional fallacy* and insisting on the semantic autonomy of the text, and then by introducing the idea of the *death of the author*.

The condemnation of biographism in Anglo-Saxon literary theory and criticism culminated in Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s text “The Intentional Fallacy”. For them, the “intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 468), and there is no reliable method of discovering the author’s intent. Also, poetry differs from the utterances of communicative language, which are quite understandable only if we take into account the intention of the speaker. In the case of poetry, the intent comes down to replace the state of mind of the author (at the time of creation) with biographical data. Finally, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, the poem is determined by the language and belongs to the public, not the author or its interpreter.

A decade and a half later, within the framework of liberal political ideas that appeared in France in the 1960s, the writer’s reputation as a kind of *cultural icon* was finally undermined. The main proponent of these new ideas in literature was Roland Barthes. His idea of the author’s death challenges the traditional, Lanson critique, which sought the meaning of a literary work in noticing social influences on the writer, recognizing the reader’s expectations, and analyzing the text itself. For Roland Barthes, the author is no longer the center of the work, nor can the work have such a focus. Unlike the American New Critics, Barthes is interested in his role in society. As a leftist, he is particularly concerned

with the author as the institution of civil, bourgeois society and therefore proclaims his death.

The question of the center of the text or interpretation is irrelevant if we ask ourselves what the text means to us *now*, while at the same time trying to find out what it meant to those before us, that is, what the text meant *then*. Thus, the author is not and cannot be the center of the text. The exclusion of the author as a possible object of literary research is directly related to the rejection of the historical perspective in the interpretation of literature and consequently the refusal of some methods of interpretation.

I choose the term historical author because he is not the real flesh-and-blood biographical author. It means that we perceive his existence through his texts, from which he emerges. The historical author is embedded in texts and revealed through texts. Its existence is primarily textual, secondarily historical, for he belongs to a particular time and society. The historical author realizes the less visible sense of the text, which often refers to the author's poetic or ideological beliefs. For example, Dostoevsky's letters, essays, diaries, comments left on the manuscripts of his novels, together with his literary texts, build the historical author. It can give us an idea of Dostoevsky as an author who is an interpreter of his time. It is the same with Jonathan Swift, whose texts, placed in the appropriate context, reveal Swift as a historical author.

More or less obviously, my notion of historical author resembles the theoretical concept of the implied author, introduced by Wayne Booth in 1961 in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*:

Whether we call this implied author an "official scribe," or adopt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson – the author's "second self" – it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author's most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner—and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values. (71)

In Booth's view, the implied author could be both the real man, and the authorial image implied by the text. For me, the second part of Booth's construction leads to the historical author; it is the authorial image implied by the text, the "second self" (71) which no longer leads in any way to the real man as a biographical author.

To detect the presence of the historical author through text, we shall focus our attention on the discrepancy between the voice of the

fictional narrator, Lemuel Gulliver, and its relevant contextual implications. We start from the assumption that there are two Gullivers: the “true” and the “false” one. We use the terms “true” and “false” to denote two narrative voices: the first is the “true” Gulliver, the narrator who speaks the truth of the text. The second one is the “false” Gulliver, the narrator who does not tell the truth unless we interpret his statements as ironic. The statements of the first, less present, “true” Gulliver are not ironic, while the utterances of the second, more present, “false” Gulliver are ironic. The first voice expresses directly the views of the historical author (Swift) and the second (interpreted as irony) in an indirect way. Both these voices express the same views about colonization. An example of the interplay of the minority, “true” Gulliver, and the majority, “false” Gulliver, is on the last pages of the *Gulliver’s travels*. Gulliver recalls his patriotic duties first:

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. (Swift 1995, 263)

The “true” Gulliver delivered a truth relevant to political reality. In the following paragraph, we are confronted with Gulliver’s dilemma and his disagreement over the stated fact:

But, I had another Reason which made me less forward to enlarge his Majesty’s Dominions by my Discoveries: To say the Truth, I had conceived a few Scruples with relation to the distributive Justice of Princes upon those Occasions. For Instance, A Crew of Pyrates are driven by a Storm they know not whither; at length a Boy discovers Land from the Top-mast; they go on Shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless People, are entertained with Kindness, they give the Country a new Name, they take formal Possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten Plank or a Stone for a Memorial, they murder two or three Dozen of the Natives, bring away a Couple more by Force for a Sample, return home, and get their Pardon. (Swift 1995, 264)

These are the words of the same Gulliver who repeatedly demonstrated to be a staunch promoter of the civilizational reach of his homeland. However, in the passage that follows, Gulliver talks about some additional consequences of colonization:

Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by *Divine Right*. Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, their Princes tortured to discover their Gold; a

free Licence given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: And this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a *modern Colony* sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People. (Swift 1995, 264)

This sentence draws out its meaning from the colonial reality of Swift's time. At first glance, there is nothing in that sentence that has been invented by Gulliver. It is the voice of the "true", minority Gulliver, whose voice matches the political beliefs of the historical author, Jonathan Swift.

There is also a syntagm in the passage that distorts its meaning: "a new Dominion" is acquired by "*Divine Right*" (Swift 1995, 264). This syntagm shows all the complexity of Swift's use of irony. In the voice of the "true" Gulliver, the voice of the "false" Gulliver is inserted, and a discrepancy of voices is achieved. *Divine Right* does not refer to a Christian divine right; what the colonizers are referring to could be something other than a political doctrine in defense of monarchical absolutism, which asserted that kings derived their authority from God – it is even the opposite of it. The same can be said for "an idolatrous and barbarous People" who, neither guilty nor obliged, are massacred and enslaved by an "execrable Crew of Butchers" (Swift 1995, 264) who are, apparently, not very familiar with the most basic Christian norms of behavior towards fellow humans.

However, as soon as Gulliver expressed his opinion about the colonizers (but also the ruler and the church behind them), in the next paragraph, he expresses quite different views:

But this Description, I confess, doth by no means affect the *British Nation*, who may be an Example to the whole World for their Wisdom, Care, and Justice in planting Colonies; their liberal Endowments for the Advancement of Religion and Learning; their Choice of devout and able Pastors to propagate *Christianity*; their Caution in stocking their Provinces with People of sober Lives and Conversations from this the Mother Kingdom; their strict Regard to the Distribution of Justice [...] And to crown all, by sending the most vigilant and virtuous Governors, who have no other Views than the Happiness of the People over whom they preside, and the Honour of the King their Master. (Swift 1995, 265)

Instead of the voice of the minority Gulliver (which corresponds to the truth of the text), the voice of the majority Gulliver enters the scene. On this issue, Claude Rawson makes an excellent remark:

This cannot be the same Gulliver, unless he is being stingingly ironic. [...] But it seems more natural to read both passages as ultimately emanating from a Swiftian rather than Gulliverian voice, the first expressing indignation literally, the second doing so ironically, with an added sarcasm at the species of British complacency frequently expressed by travel writers and imperial adventurers before and since. (115)

In other words, both voices express indignation; the first voice directly, the second indirectly, using irony. The two voices are connected by a reference to Christianity. In the first one, there is *Divine Right*; in the second, *a mission to propagate Christianity*. The real meaning of the Christian mission in the second passage elucidates the list of the crimes against the subjugated people present in the first. The colonizers do not spread true Christian values, because they do not act like Christians but as a *Crew of Butchers*. The second passage should, therefore, be read as ironic. It means the opposite of what was stated. Governor-led colonizers are negligent, wicked, and corrupt – they are a terrible *Crew of Butchers*.

The separation of the two voices, Swift's and Gulliver's, the "true" from the "false" Gulliver, is also noticeable in the mention of "harmless People" who are "entertained with kindness" (Swift 1995, 264). Almost none of these *harmless People* are to be found during Lemuel Gulliver's travels. Lilliputians in particular are not harmless, on the contrary, they are very warlike. The "falsehood" of Gulliver's voice is shown by changing his own narrative past. Swift achieves this by using irony and satire. To be a successful colonizer, Gulliver must possess the qualities of his hosts – the Lilliputians – and, above all, the qualities of a Lilliputian king, who "generously" saves Gulliver from a terrible death. It is a parody of the colonization process, where small (Lilliputians) colonize large (Gulliver). In the generous plan of the Lilliputian King, Gulliver will remain alive but blind:

That if his Majesty, in Consideration of your Services, and pursuant to his own merciful Disposition, would please to spare your Life, and only give order to put out both your Eyes; he humbly conceived, that by this Expedient, Justice might in some measure be satisfied, and all the World would applaud the *Lenity* of the Emperor, as well as the fair and generous Proceedings of those who have the Honour to be his Counsellors. That the Loss of your Eyes would be no Impediment to your bodily Strength, by which you might still be useful to his Majesty. (Swift 1995, 81)

It is an irony. The king plans to *spare* the life of his friend Gulliver from the death penalty by blinding him. Blinding Gulliver would only mean the beginning of his punishment, which would continue with his starvation, and finally, his death. That is why, if understood without irony, most of Gulliver's utterances are "false". Gulliver's two voices, directly and indirectly, point to the historical author Jonathan Swift.

Another text that reveals the historical author Jonathan Swift is *The Modest Proposal* (1729) where the author asserts that life in Ireland is so bad that the only way out is to sell the children to the butcher:

a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout. (2008, 7)

For Christopher Fox, Swift's thoughts in the Proposal are "in line with the respectable economic theory that people are the wealth of the nation. The work takes this literally" (1995a, 6). Cannibalism cures the woes of the economy. Hawes notices that cannibalism is a "term so freighted with racist history that it has no application outside the discourse of European colonialism" (190). Swift's *The Modest Proposal* is a severe condemnation of the practice of colonialism and he also takes a stand about the tragic nature of the world where everything can be expressed in numbers, which leads to the destruction of humanity.

By discovering the historical author, it becomes clear that the cannibals from *The Modest Proposal* are ruthless *Crew of Butchers*. No more wise, righteous, and caring Christians that we find in the analyzed passage of *Gulliver's Travels*. The colonizers are the complete opposite of Christian missionaries full of virtues. The hidden truths of *Gulliver's Travels* reveal both the intentions of the British colonizers and the greedy nature of mankind as a whole.

### **The Present Reader**

The present reader is a well-educated critic, who possesses knowledge of literary history and the change of literary periods, procedures, and genres but most of all, he knows the methodology of interpreting literature. He is also an informed reader in the meaning given to it by Stanley Fish: he fully masters the language in which the text is written; knows variants of that language, that is, knows its collocations, dialects, idioms, etc. Therefore, the arbitrariness of the act of reading is largely limited by language competence. In addition, he/she/it possesses literary competence, i.e. recognizes literary conventions and other characteristics of a literary text, from tropes to

genre definitions. As Fish points out, the informed reader “does everything within his power to make him-self informed” (145). The present (informed) reader recognizes the interpretive importance of the historical reader and assesses the relevance of its interpretations. Thanks to historical knowledge, today’s reader perceives and understands the irony of *Gulliver’s Travels* much better than Swift’s contemporaries; centuries of colonial and neocolonial practice made irony more visible and easier to interpret. Also, the informed reader does not miss Swift’s political satire.

Besides irony and satire, today’s reader also notices parody in the text. Things are reversed by parody; the large is signified as small and the small as large. The little people (Lilliputians) are actually big – they are colonizers; big people (such as Gulliver) are small, captured, subjugated, and colonized. Colonial politics shows its essence: instead of immediately destroying the colonized people extermination happens gradually; the nation should be blinded (deprive it of the opportunity for education and learning) and then starved so that it can work and serve the colonizer (Lilliputians).

Here, we also recognize the symbolic meaning of *Gulliver’s Travels*, especially in the episode with the Lilliputians. In an ethical sense, the colonized are human, worthy and great, and colonizers are inhumane, small, worthless. The planned blindness of Gulliver is, in fact, the destruction of the cultural identity of the people. An example of such a destruction of cultural identity is April 10, 1883, act by the US Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller. On that date, the US government, in the final campaign to systematically suppress the cultural heritage of Native Americans, banned all Native American languages, their religion, culture, and customs. Teller’s law prohibits “Native American ceremonial activity under pain of imprisonment” (Irwin 35) and represents one of many examples of contemporary neocolonialism that corresponds to Swift’s ingenious insight into the essence of subjugation and exploitation.

An example much closer to the present moment is the discovery of hundreds of graves on the site of a former school for Indigenous children in Canada. From the 19th century to the 1970s, more than 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to attend a Christian school funded by the Canadian state.

The children died far from home after having suffered brutal abuse and neglect. For decades, Indigenous children in both Canada and the United States were taken away from their families and sent to boarding schools, where they were forced to assimilate to Euro-American culture.” (McGreevy)

Cultural assimilation is another example of colonial politics, where “blinding” means losing one’s own cultural identity. As in Gulliver’s case, the process of cultural assimilation can end in starvation and death. Swift’s ironically disguised truth about colonialism received another tragic confirmation.

### Conclusion

The observed factors in the interpretation of *Gulliver’s travels* are a consequence of the overlap of synchronic and diachronic approaches in literary studies. It is important to recognize the historical reader and the historical author. As we have seen, they help us to understand that the work belongs not only to us, the present readers, but also to the past and that the context is important for the understanding of literature. No less significant is the meaning created by rhetorical techniques; in our interpretation, recognition of irony and parody in the text of *Gulliver’s travels* had great importance. The perspective of the present is the last interpretative step: it is a natural reading perspective that implies an informed reader – a reader who is aware of his/her/their position and who includes the previous interpretative steps in the process of complete interpretation.

I agree with Stephen Greenblatt and other proponents of the New Historicism that context is not a passive background of the text we read. Indeed, context is created by texts, but it is not, as they think, fully unstable. The context changes its form, but its essence remains the same. The interaction of historical author, historical reader, and present reader determines its stability. What was important in the past is still important now, only in a different way. The perspective of the present shows the importance of the perspective of the past, which in our example shows the essential immutability of the context of Swift’s novel. It is still a political context. In Swift’s time, it was the context of colonialism, which in our time took the form of neocolonialism.

The context that I have in mind is not just the context of the time in which the work was created. It is a truly comprehensive horizon, which encompasses the horizon of the past, but far more the horizon of the present, the beliefs and presuppositions of the reader of the interpreted text. The truly comprehensive horizon includes the historical horizon, but also us, present readers, as those who ask and are affected by the word that comes from the past. As Gadamer said:

The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns

to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion. (316)

Our analysis has shown that Swift's truth about the ruthless nature of colonialism is also relevant to today's reader. The past is closer to us, and thus the present is more understandable. In this way, the importance of the literary method is shown, making it possible for "literature [to] remain central to discourse, culture, ideology, and so on because literature encompasses all of them and raises questions about all of them by merely shifting its vantage points, namely, its genre and its conventions" (Riffaterre 73). Linguistic, philological, historical, cultural, religious, and philosophical knowledge has always been a condition for the understanding of literature as a linguistic, cultural, and spiritual phenomenon. It is because of such considerations that we can state that "literary phenomena and their interactions with social and cultural phenomena, with philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, politics are diverse and changeable and enter the framework of the study of literature" (Kvas 51). At the same time, the awareness of the autonomy of the literary phenomenon to other manifestations of the human spirit prevents the study of literature from being unnecessarily assimilated into other humanities.

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### СКРИВЕНЕ ИСТИНЕ ГУЛИВЕРОВИХ ПУТОВАЊА ЏОНАТАНА СВИФТА

У раду је представљен приступ књижевности заснован на анализи три фактора: историјског читаоца, историјског аутора и упућеног читаоца. Применом синхрониских и дијахрониских метода читања предлаже се прихватљиво критичко читање књижевног дела. Циљ рада је да објасни функционисање сва три фактора тумачењем *Гуливерових путовања* Џонатана Свифта. Резултат тумачења је откривање истине о правој природи колонијализма, која је и данас актуелна. Истовремено, рад показује значај примене одговарајуће методологије у проучавању књижевности као начина остваривања и очувања њене аутономије у односу на друге хуманистичке науке.

**Кључне речи:** књижевни метод, историјски читалац, историјски аутор, упућени читалац, Свифт, *Гуливерова путовања*.