

# Jonathan Swift

(1667-1745)

## Biography

Jonathan Swift was born on 30 November 1667 in Dublin to English parents, but he never knew his father, as he died before his birth. Between 1673 and 1686, thanks to the help of his uncle, he managed to study at Kilkenny Grammar School and then at the famous Trinity College in Dublin. In 1694 he took orders as a priest in the Church of England.

In 1702 he contributed to journals like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. He also was a member of the Scriblerus Club with Alexander Pope, to ridicule 'all false taste in learning'. In 1704 Swift's works *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of the Books* were published. After working for the Whig party, Swift changed to the Tories in 1710. In 1713 he became Dean of St Patrick's, Dublin, which he considered a sort of exile, after experiencing London literary circles. Between 1720 and 1730 he wrote a number of pamphlets in favour of the Irish.

*The Drapier's Letters* was published in 1724, while *Gulliver's Travels* appeared in 1726. In 1728 Stella, his lifelong love and perhaps wife (there is no proof of this wedding), died. Swift wrote *Journal to Stella*.

In 1729 *A Modest Proposal* was published. In 1742 he was declared insane and in 1745, after several years in which his health had deteriorated, he died.

## Satire

The satirical prose or poetry composition undermines aristocratic culture because it unveils the defects of this society in both manners and morality and makes fun of vices and follies by using irony, wit and ridicule. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century it was the favourite means to mock and attack the corrupt aristocracy, namely in the works of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745).

18<sup>th</sup>-century satire is mainly indebted to the French satirist Rabelais and combines irony and fantasy. It exposes the hypocrisy of society through a number of strategies like **diminution, inflation, inversion, juxtaposition**. On a stylistic level, the main figures of speech used to create these strategies are:

- understatement;
- hyperbole;
- symbolism;
- allusion.

The final result of Swift's choices in his masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is that Gulliver's world has lost its balanced perspective and seems to be seen through a magnifying or deforming glass, altering both Gulliver's and the reader's perception. For example, like typical writers of satire, Swift frequently shows familiar objects from a completely unfamiliar point of view, so that the readers can judge them more clearly and become aware that **human nature is absurd**.

## Style

Swift's style mixes **satire, allegory, and irony**.

**Satire** consists of a mocking attack against vices, stupidities, and follies, with an aim to educate, edify and improve.

**Allegory** is Swift's second satirical tool. It is a device in which characters, situations, and places have a significance that goes beyond what they are in themselves. Allegory, like satire, is used to teach. The Lilliputians, for example, are allegorical Whigs: to make his devastating case against them, however, Swift needs to disguise them as Lilliputians. The Academy of Projectors is an allegory of the Royal Society, while the Yahoos are an allegory for a part of human nature.

**Irony** is when the intended meaning of a statement or an action is opposite to what is presented.

There are several different types of irony:

- **verbal irony** occurs when you say something but you mean the opposite. ('You look happy today' to a very sad person);
- **irony of situation** occurs when there is a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually happens (a no smoking sign on a packet of cigarettes);
- **dramatic irony** is a literary technique in which the audience knows something that is unknown to the characters. Irony is used to show the folly of humankind, the tragedy of a situation or to criticise society at large.

## ***Gulliver's Travels* (1726)**

Divided into four volumes, the book was published anonymously in 1726 as a follow-up to *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and met with immediate success. Swift's satire is both an **allegorical attack** against the vanity and hypocrisy of England, its court, statesmen and political parties, and a **bitter meditation** on humankind, written in a mocking tone. It is full of imagination and wit, told as an adventurous journey, which made it a children's classic.

The plot deals with Doctor Lemuel Gulliver's four voyages to strange lands.

Gulliver himself is the narrator and protagonist, a figure whose reactions to the strange countries are a source of amusement and reflection for the reader, since he is the flexible link between the reader's ordinary world and the New Worlds, either ridiculous or utopistically perfect. The continuous shifts in point of view gradually change his and our perception of the world around.

- **1<sup>st</sup> voyage.** Gulliver first visits Lilliput, a sort of microcosm inhabited by people who are 1/12<sup>th</sup> the size of normal people; he is treated well and helps them, but then he has to escape from them.
- **2<sup>nd</sup> voyage.** In the country of Brobdingnag the people are giants 12 times larger than our protagonist and they laugh at his puny size.
- **3<sup>rd</sup> voyage.** He visits several kingdoms, including the flying island of Laputa, where he meets odd people who represent foolishness, namely that of impractical scientists and philosophers who rely too much on the power of reason.
- **4<sup>th</sup> voyage.** Gulliver is in the land of wise horses called Houyhnhnms, animals endowed with great intelligence, high moral standards and a language of their own which does not include the word 'lying'. A herd of savage and stupid animals also lives on the island: they are the Yahoos and look like human beings. The two peoples represent the dichotomy of reason/unreason or sanity/madness. Gulliver would like to stay, but he is too similar to the Yahoos to be appreciated and is obliged to leave. In England, however, his final and bitter disillusionment prevents him from returning to his family: a stable in the company of horses will be his only shelter against despair.