ISSN: 3043-467X



EXPLORING THE TIMELESS DEPICTION OF HUMAN FLAWS IN JONATHAN SWIFT'S GULLIVERS' TRAVELS: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

By

Akpan, Godwin Friday PhD
Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University of Education,
Afaha Nsit, Akwa Ibom State
akpangody5@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper takes a stylistic analysis of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travel, examining how the author's use of language contributes to its theme of timeless depiction of the universality of human flaws. The study adopted a content analysis approach where the text was closely read and studied. Though randomly selected, the study examines Swift's use of irony, satire, hyperbole, symbolism, allusion and repetition as well as various sentence types and grammatical structures to critique human nature. The analysis brings to the fore that Swift's use of language are not only intentional but also deliberate and serves as an effective resources for highlighting the absurdity and complexity of human nature, rending *Gulliver's Travels* a powerful and enduring critique of human flaws. The outcomes of this study demonstrate the significance of the author's novel as a timeless commentary on human nature, with implications for our understandings of the human condition in contemporary society.

Keywords: Stylistics analysis, human flaws, language, stylistic devices, structuralism, satire theory.

INTRODUCTION

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift is a timeless satirical piece which has enjoyed some scholarly interpretation for centuries. It is particularly interesting especially as its tone, language, theme and style continually resonate with the contemporary realities of the present world. The text, was written in 1726, exactly, 299 years ago. This timeless classic is a scathing critique of societal norms, politics, and human nature, offering a clear exploring of the universality of evil in humanity. For as, Christopher Lloyd (1939:xvi) observes," Swift wished to show, as in a mirror, the pettiness of human affairs and to show that man's egotism is due to his failure to see human affairs in their true proportion". It is this position that made Swift himself to say that "man is really an insignificant creature, but he thinks himself the centre of the whole scheme of thing (*Gulliver's Travel*, xvi). Through Lemuel Gulliver's fantastical voyages, Swift masterfully exposes the flaws and follies of humanity, revealing a universal truth that evil is an inherent aspect of human nature, manifesting in various forms and guises across culture and time (Bloom, 2009). This is akin to William Golding's Lord of the Flies. Recent stylistic scholarship emphasizes the role of linguistic choices in shaping readers interpretation of literary texts and their underlying Ideological meanings (Jeffries & Mcintyre, 2018).

The theme of evil as portrayed in Gulliver's Travels is a complex one, encompassing issues of moral depravity, corruption, and destructiveness (Arendt, 1963). Thus, Swift's use of satire, irony and symbolism serves to highlight the pervasive nature of evil, demonstrating how it can manifest in even the most seemingly civilized societies (Quint, 1988). Therefore, Swift language and style is not only timeless but also a clear demonstration of his mastery. In commenting about Swift style, Lloyd (1939:xv-xvi)

> …partly the extraordinary vivid and concrete picture Swift draws; partly the beautiful lucidity of his style: the style is clear, masculine, and smooth, but nor florid: for they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary words; or using various expressions. It is a good definition of Swift's own style, which enables him to tell a story clearly with exactly the right amount of detail.

Commenting on Style, Crystal (2010) says it is the choices a writer makes about language, tone, and format to convey their message effectively. Akpan (2025) adds that style encompasses elements like vocabulary, syntax, punctuation, and tone, which contribute to the overall clarity, coherence and impact of the text.

On the other hand, language plays a significant role in shaping stylistic choices, as it influences the choices writers make about tone, vocabulary, syntax, and other linguistic features. According to Leech and Short (1981), language is the primary means by which stylistic choices are realized, and it shapes the writer's attitude, perspective, and it

shapes the writers attitude, perspective, and relationship with the reader. Therefore, no doubt, language makes man unique in his communication because it enables him to capture his social complexities in their various unique forms and manners of occurrence. This makes Otagburuaga (1999), believes that all normal human beings communicate through this mode. An important point to note about the use of language in communication is that every language satisfies the communicative needs of the users. This is true as human beings really capture their experiences in their communication with others.

Despite being written over two centuries ago, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* remains a powerful commentary on human nature, satirizing the flaws and follies of humanity that are still prevalent today. This study examine the stylistic devices and thematic concerns employed by Swift to depict human flaws, and argues that the novel's timeless portrayal of human nature makes it a work of enduring relevance and importance in contemporary society.

About Jonathan Swift and *Gulliver Travels*

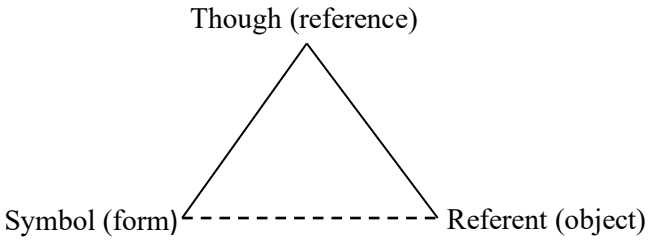
Jonathan Swift was an Anglo-Irish writer, poet, and satirist. He lived between 1667-1745. He was born in Dublin, Ireland, Swift was educated at trinity College Dublin, and later moved to England, where he became involved in political and literature. He was a prominent figure in London literary circles and was known for his witty and insightful writings on politics, society and literature.

Some of Swift's works include: *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), *The Battle of Books* (1704), *A Meditation Upon a Broomstick* (1710), *The Examiner* (1710), *The Conduct of Allies* (1711), *A Modest Proposal* (1729), *Gulliver Travels* (1726), *The Draplier's Letters* (1725), and *A Complete Collection of Gental and Ligneous Conversation* (1738), among many others. Swift's writings often employed satire, irony and ridicule to critique societal norms, politics, and human nature. The book under study – *Gulliver's Travels*, is a classic example of satire, using fantasy and absurdity to comment on the politics, culture, and values of his time (Winker, 2005).

Gulliver's Travel (1726) is a satirical novel that tells the story of Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon who embarks on four fantastical voyages to remote Island. The novel is divided into four books, each describing a different journey: Lilliput, Brobdingnang, Laputa and Balnibarbi and Houghnhnms and Yahoos. Through Gulliver's adventures Swift critiques the politics, culture and values of his time, using satire to comment on issues like colonialism, nationalism, and the abuse of power. The novel's enduring popularity lies in its timeless themes and its ability to entertain, educate, and challenge readers to reflect on their own society and humanity.

The Concept of Stylistics

According to Leech and Short (1981), Stylistics is the study of language used in literary works, focusing on the ways in which authors employ linguistic features to convey meaning, create effects, and evoke emotions. For Fish (1986), style is the peculiarity and uniqueness elements of a text, such as syntax, vocabulary, imagery and tone, to understand how they contribute to the overall meaning and impact of the work. By meaning, it refers to the interpretation or understanding a text's significance, message, or theme. By this we mean the underlying idea, concepts, or idea that the author conveys through the narrative, characters, language, and other literary elements. This affirms Ogden and Richards (1949) semantic or semiotic triangle, where they opined that meaning arises from a relationship among three things: the object (or referent), the person (or interpreter), and the sign.



Explaining this diagram, Okeke (2010) explicates that words refer to things they name rather than signify and that the word is a composite of form and concept while, symbol is the word, sentence or form; referent or object in the object in the world of experience and thought or reference is the concept. This dotted lines imply that there is no direct link between the symbol and referent but only through the mediation of thought or reference. However, burke (2017) argues that modern stylistic analysis provides valuable tools for examining the relationship between textual patterns and literary meaning.

In all of this, meaning is still an abstract, vague and a slippery concept. It is not fixed or static. It is in our estimation subjective and can vary depending on the reader's interpretation, cultural context, and historical period. Readers bring their own experiences, biases, and perspectives to the text, influencing their understanding of the meaning.

Stylistics draws on various linguistic theories and approaches, including foregrounding, deviation, register, and cognitive. To stockwell (2020), cognitive stylistic approaches suggest that literary texts engage readers by activating, mental frameworks through language and narrative structure. Stylisticians examine how language is used to create meaning, how it deviates from norms, and how readers process and interprete literary texts. By combining these approaches, the stylistics analyst can provide a

comprehensive analysis of the literary work, shedding light on the complex interplay between language, meaning and context. In this study, we will examine the language employed by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* to uncover the underlying patterns and structures that shape the narrative, revealing the author's craft and artistry. This will help us gain a deeper understanding of the text, appreciate the writer's craft, and develop a more objective interpretation of the text. Contemporary studies in stylistic continue to demonstrate how language functions as a vehicle for social representation of social realities, attitudes, and human behavior (Simpson, 2019).

Theoretical Domain

This study will anchor on a mix of theories to enable it properly situate the study. It will draw on Ferdinand de Saussure theory of structuralism which sees language as a system of signs, the signifier and signified, and the important structure and relations in understanding meaning. Also, the study uses the satire theory, a theory that has evolved over time, with various writers contributing to its development. It main concern is using humour, irony, and ridicule to critique society and politics. It will also draw from postcolonial theory which is concerned with the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have shaped the world we lived in, particularly in terms of power dynamics, cultural identity and social justice. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) will be deployed in analyzing sentences from the text (Halliday, 1978). Contemporary discussions of structuralism continue to recognize it's importance in understanding how meaning is produced through underlying systems of language and representation (Culler, 2023). Even Dong et al., (2025) collaborate this position that structuralist approaches remain relevant for examining patterns, relationships, and symbolic structures within literary texts. In addition to the above, Onah (2024) in commenting on postcolonial theory emphasizes the need to foreground marginalized histories, indigenous epistemologies and alternative forms of cultural memory in literary studies. Finally on systemic functional grammar, Doran, Martin & Herrington (2024) maintain that SFG have further expanded the study of context meaning making, and discourse organization in textual analysis.

Stylistic Devices used in Gulliver's Travels

S/N	Devices	Example (Page/Chapter)	Explanation	Relevance
1.	Satire	Brobdingnagnian's Reaction to European society (book ii, ch.6)	Swift satirizes European society by depicting the Brobdingnagnians disgust at human	Critique the excesses and corruption of European society

			behavior, highlighting the flaws of Europeans culture	
2.	Verbal irony	Gulliver's descriptions of the honyhnhnms	Uses verbal irony to highlight the contradictions between reason and humanity	Verbal irony is used in contemporary literature and rhetoric to create complex characters and emphasize social commentary.
3.	Hyperbole	Gulliver's descriptions of European achievements	Exaggerates European achievements to highlight the absurdity of colonialism and cultural pride	Hyperbole is used in modern media and politics to emphasize points, but can also be misleading or alienating if not used carefully.
4.	Symbolism	The big endian and little endian controversy	Represents the triviality of religious and ideological disputes	Symbolism is used in contemporary literature and art to comment on social issues and cultural norms
5.	Metaphor	Lilliput as a "great empire"	Compares Lilliput to European empires, highlighting the absurdity of national pride	Metaphors shape our understanding of complex Issues, this example highlights how language influences our perception of power dynamics
6.	Allegory	The Lilliputians and Blefuscus	Represent the petty squabbles of European nations,	Allegories continue to be used in literature and art to comment on

			critiquing colonialism and nationalism	contemporary issues and politics
7.	Allusion	References to historical figures and events	Alludes to historical figures and events to critique colonialism and highlight the universality of human folly	Allusions continue to be used in contemporary discourse to draw parallels between historical and currents events.
8.	Anaphora	Repetition of "it is throughout the text"	Repeats a phrase to emphasize the benefits of the proposal, adding to the irony and satire	Anaphora is used in modern speeches and writing to create emphasis and rhythm, making arguments more persuasive
9.	Eupheism	"breeders" (referring to women)	Uses euphemism to dehumanize women and emphasize their economic value	Eupheisms can be used to obscure or highlights issues; in modern discourse, they're often used to critique or challenge social norms
10.	Apostrophe	"o ye futile politicians"	Addresses an absent or abstract entity, adding to the satire and emphasizing the critique of colonialism	Apostrophe is used in contemporary literature and rhetoric to create emotional appeals and engage audiences
11.	Parody	Gulliver's accounts of English customs	Parodies travel writing and exploration accounts, critiquing European colonialism	Parody is used in contemporary media and literature to comment on social issues and cultural norms

12.	Irony	Book 1, chapter 1 "a modest proposal"	Swift uses irony to propose the absurd solution of eating Irish babies to address poverty	Highlights the absurdity of extreme solutions to complex problems, relevant in today's debate
13.	Rhetorical question	"is it not a sad thing to see…"(page 175)	Asks a question to engage the reader and emphasize the absurdity of the situation	Rhetorical questions are commonly used in contemporary discourse to engage audiences and encourage critical thinking
14.	Enallage	" I have been assured by a very knowing American….." (P. Boo)_	Uses an unusual grammatical construction to mimic the speech of a pedant, adding to the satire	Enallage can be used to create complex characters or emphazise certain traits, relevant in literary and rhetorical analysis.

These stylistic devices contribute to the text's powerful critique of colonialism, nationalism, and human nature, making Gulliver's travels a timeless classic relevant to present-day discussions.

Sentences Typologies

In Jonathan *Swift's Gulliver's Travels*, the author deploys a variety of sentence types to enable him narrate his experiences. These sentences are captivating and incisive. By the employment of simple, compound, and complex sentence, the writer creates a sense of wonder, satire, and social commentary, drawing the reader into the "utopian" worlds of Lilliput, Brobdingnang, and beyond. In this study, attempt would be made to explore how the author's sentence structures contribute to the overall meaning and tone of the novel. Here are some specific examples.

Table II- Showing Sentence Typologies

Example	Page	Type	Explanation/reason
I was extremely well received by him	Page, 10 Lilliput	Simple	Used to convey a straightforward fact, creating a sense of clarity and directness
The inhabitants of this of this country are very small	Page, 20 Lilliput	Simple	Used to introduce a new idea, creating a sense of wonder and curiosity
I was weary with travelling	Page, 8 Lilliput	Simple	Used to express a personal feeling, creating a sense of intimacy and relatability
The king was greatly delighted with my discourse	Page, 30 Lilliput	Simple	Used to convey a sense of importance and grandeur, highlighting the king's reaction
I drew my fetters leisurely off	Page, 8 Lilliput	Simple	Used to describe a simple action, creating a sense of calm and tranquility
I was weary with travelling, and sitting on the ground; so I drew my fetters leisurely off, and let them fall on the ground	page, 8 Lilliput	Compound	Used to connect two related ideas, creating a sense of cause and effect
The king was greatly delighted with my discourse, and particularly with description of the English constitution	Page, 30 Lilliput	Compound	Used to add more information to an idea, creating a sense of emphasis and importance
I had a great desire to see the chief temples, and particularly that of the principal God, called Glumdalclitch	Page, 50 Brobdingnang	Compound	Used to connect two related ideas, creating a sense of addition and expansion

I was extremely well received by the king and I had a great deal of conversation with him	Page, 40 Lilliput	Compound	Used to connect two related ideas creating a sense of sequence and progression
The queen was very curious, and she asked me many questions about my country.	Page,60 Lilliput	Compound	Used to add more information to an idea, creating a sense of interest and enquiry
When I had thus spoken, the emperor, who had been gazing at me with great curiosity, seemed to be struck with amazement	Page, 32 Lilliput	Compound	Used to show a relationship between ideas, creating a sense of course and effect.
The king who was greatly delighted with my discourse, asked me whether I thought it would be possible to introduce a similar form of government among the Lilliputians	Page, 35 Lilliput	Compound	Used to provide additional information about the subject, creating a sense of complexity
When I had thus spoken, the emperor, who had been gazing at me with great curiosity, seemed to be struck with amazement	Page, 32 Lilliput	Complex	used to show relationship between ideas, creating a sense of cause and effect
As I was walking in the fields, I saw, I saw a group of people who were gathered around a strange creature	Page, 20 Lilliput	Complex	Used to show a relationship between ideas, creating a sense of time and sequence.
The queen who was very kind to me asked to tell her about my country	Page,60 Brobdingnang	Complex	Used to provide additional information about the subject, creating a sense of kindness and generosity

When I was extremely well received by the king who was greatly delighted with my discourse, and particularly with the description of the English constitutional; but I think I must confess, that I was not altogether so well satisfied with the reception I met with from the queen	Page 40 Lilliput	Compound complex	Used to connect multiple ideas and show relationships between them, creating a sense of complexity and understanding
When I was brought before the king, I was surprised to see how tall he was; and I was even more surprised when he spoke to me in a vice that was like thunder	Page, 30 Lilliput	Compound complex	Used to connect multiple ideas and show relationships between them, creating a sense of cause and effect
The queen was very curious, and she asked me many questions about my country; and I was happy to answer her questions	Page, 60 Brobdingnang	Compound complex	Used to connect multiple ideas and show relationships between them, creating a sense of sequence and progression
I had a great desire to see the chief temples; and particularly that of the principal god, called Glumdalclitch; but I was not allowed to go there	Page 50 Brobdingnang	Compound complex	Used to connect multiple ideas and show relationships between them, creating a sense of contrast and surprise.

From the above, Swift use of sentences are suiting for his theme. For instance, the author employs a range of sentence structures to create a sense of wonders, satire, and social commentary. Simple sentences are used to pass on straight forward information; compound sentences are used to connect related ideas, and complex sentences are deployed to show relationship between ideas, while compound – complex sentences are used to create intricate and nuanced arguments. Primarily, the author's use of these sentences contribute to the clarity, elegance, and persuasive power of his writing.

Swift's use of Grammatical Structures

Swift use of grammatical structures in *Gulliver's Travels* contributes significantly to his literary style, tone, and theme. Here are some features of the author's use of grammatical structures.

Table III – Showing Grammatical Structures

Latinate sentence structure

Example	Page	Explanation/reason
Upon my refusing to comply with this demand, the council determined to our me to death, as a person guilty of high treason agonist the state of Lilliput	32	This sentence has a complex, Latinate structure, with multiple subordinate clauses and a formal fore, which emphasize the gravity and absurdity of the Lilliputians' decision
The Emperor, being greatly delisted with my discourse, and particularly with the description of the English constitution, asked me whether I thought of would be possible to introduce a similar form of government among form Lilliputians	35	This sentence has a formal, Latinate stricture, with a complex system of subordinate clauses, which highlights the emperor's pompous and sex-important native
HYPOTAXIS		
When I had thus spoken, the emperor, who had been gazing at me with great curiosity, seemed to be struck with amazement	32	The subordinate clause "when I had thus spoken" is embedded within the main clause, creating a complex sentence shows the relationship between Gulliver's speech and the emperor's reaction
The king, who was greatly delighted with my discourse, asked me whether I thought it would be possible to introduce a similar form of government among the Lilliputians	35	The subordinate clause, "who was greatly delighted with my discourse" prouder additional information about the king, while the main clause conveys his question
PARATAXIS		
I came, I saw, I conquered	8	This sentence uses parataxis, where clauses are juxtaposed without conjunctions, creating a sense of simplicity, directness and clarity.

I was weary with travelling, and sitting on the ground; so I drew my fetters leisurely off, and let them fall to the ground.	8	This sentence uses parataxis, where clauses are juxtaposed without conjunctions, creating a sense of which contrast with the complexity of the situation
Verb Tense		
I am now going to give am account of my transactions with the Lilliputians	10	The present tense, "am going" creates a sense of immediacy and vividness, droning the reader into the narrative
I have been assured by the king himself, that le took me for a prodigy of nature, and a being of a superior	10	The present perfect tenses "have been assured" creates a sense of relevance to the present moment, emphasizing the king's opinion of Gulliver
VOICE		
I was taken prisoner by the Lilliputians	20	The passive voice emphasizes Gulliver's objectivity and detachment, highlighting the absurdity of his situation
The king was greatly delighted with my discourse, and I was asked Maury questions about my country	30	The passive Grates a sense of formality and distance, emphasizing the king's power and authority
MODALITY		
I must confess, that I was not altogether was not altogether so well satisfied will the reception I met with from the queen	40	The modal verb "must" conveys Gulliver's reluctance and hesitation, highlighting his diplomatic nature
The king many perhaps think it reasonable, that I should give him a description of the English constitution	35	The modal verb, "many" conveys the king's uncertainty and tentativeness, highlighting his desire for information
CLEFT SENTENCES		
If was the king who asked me to give him a description of the English constitution	35	The cleft sentence emphasizes the king's role and importance, creating a sense of surprise and Irony.
If is a strange thing, that the Lilliputians should be so ford of tiles and ceremonies	50	The cleft sentence emphasizes the strangeness of the Lilliputians behavior Grating a sense of wonder and satire
RELATIVE CLAUSE		

The Lilliputians, who are a very ingenious people, have a great fondness for titles and ceremonies	50	The relative chaise prudes additional information about the Lilliputians Grating a sense of
The king, who was greatly delighted with my discourse, asked me many question about my country	30	The relative chaise provides additional information about the king, creating sense of complexity

From the table above, the author employ techniques like latinate sentence structure and hypotaxis to create wonder and Satire. His use of verb fence, voice, and modality adds depth while cleft sentences and relative clauses power additional information and emphasis.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion, we can conclude that swift's use of language in *Gulliver's Travels* is suiting and intentional. This was to allow him the leverage to reflectively criticize human flaws through, the author's effective deployment of devices like irony, exaggeration, symbolism, satire and metaphor he has been able to highlight the absurdity and complexity of human native, revealing the flaw and follies of humanity

Additionally, our analysis of the use of sentence structure reveals an intentional use of technique such as hypotaxis, and operational use techniques such as hypotaxis, and parataxis to create complexity in the portrayal of human native. Thus, this study reveals that swift use of language is a key factor in the novel's enduring relevance and impact. By using language in a way that is both playful and incisive, the author creates a critique of human nature that is both humorous and defrosting which is timeless and relevant to contemporary society.

REFERENCES

Akpan, G.F. (2025). *Effective Communication: Grammar, writing, speaking & Style*. Minders International Press.

Bloom, H (Ed). (2009). *Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's travels*. Infobase publishing

Burke, M. (Ed.) (2017). *The Routledge handbook of Stylistics*. Routledge.

Crystal, D. (2010). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge University.

Culler, J. (2023). *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the study of Literature.* Routledge.

Dong, F., Zeng, Y., Sang, Y., & Shen, H. (2025). *Structuralist approach to AI Literary Criticism: Leveraging Greimas semiotic square for large language model*. http:/arxiv.org/abs/2506.21360.

Doran, Y. J., Martin, J.R., & Herrington, M. (2024). Rethinking context: Realization, Instantiation, and Individualization in Systemic Functional Linguistics. *Journal of World Language* 10(1), 177-220.

Fish, S. (1986). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of Interpretive Communities*. Harvard University Press.

Halliday, M.A.K (1978*). Language as social semiotic: the Social interpretation of language and meaning.* Edward Arnold.

Jeffries, L., & Mcintyre, D. (2018). *Stylistics*. Cambridge University Press.

Leech, G. N. & Short, M. (1981). *Style in fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English fictional Press.* Longman.

Ogden, C.K. & Richards, I. A. (1949). *The meaning of meaning: A study of the influence of language upon thought and of the science of symbolism (10th Ed.).* Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Okeke, F.A. (2010). The role of language communication in the acquisition and transfer of culture in a developing nation. In Briggs, L.A. (Ed.), *International Journal of Educational Development.* Vol.1(2), 115-122

Onah, C. K. (2024). Sakiru Adebayo's continuous pasts and the challenge of Postcolonising Memory Studies: Three Musings. Cambridge *Journal of Postcolonial literary Inquiry*. 11(3), 465-472.

Otagburuaga, E. J. (1999). *New Perspectives in business communication*. MEKS Publishers Ltd.

Short, M. (1996). *Exploring the language of poems, plays and prose*. Longman Press.

Simpson, P. (2019). *Stylistics: A resource book for students*. (2nd Ed.). Routledge.

Stockwell, P. (2000). *Cognitive Poetics*: An Introduction (2nd Ed.) Routledge.

Swift, J. (1726). *Gulliver's Travels*. Benjamin Mette.

Toolcan, M. (1988). *Language in Literature: An Introduction to Stylistics*. Edward Arnold.

Winkler, K. (2005). *The Cambridge Companion of Jonathan Swift*. Cambridge University Press.