Is Gulliver a reliable narrator?

Lemuel Guliver is the narrator and protagonist of the story. Although Gulliver's vivid and detailed style of narration makes it clear that he is intelligent and well educated, his perceptions are naive and gullible. He has virtually no emotional life, or at least no awareness of it, and his comments are strictly factual, Indeed, sometimes his obsession with the facts of navigation, for example, becomes unbearable for us, as his fictional editor, Richard Simpson makes it clear when he explains having had to cut out nearly half of Gulliver's verbiage. Gulliver never thinks that the absurdities he encounters are funny and never makes the satiric connections between the lands he visits and his own home. Gulliver's naiveté makes the satire possible, as we pick up on things that Gulliver does not notice.

Although Gulliver is a bold adventurer who visits a multitude of strange lands, it is difficult to regard him as truly heroic. Even well before his slide into misanthropy at the end of the book, he simply does not show the stuff of which grand heroes are made. He is not cowardly-on the contrary, he undergoes the unnerving experiences of nearly being devoured by a giant rat, taken captive by pirates, shipwrecked on faraway shores, sexually assaulted by an eleven-year-old girl, and shot in the face with poison arrows. Additionally, the isolation from humanity that he endures for sixteen years must be hard to bear, though Gulliver rarely talks about such matters. Yet despite the courage Gulliver shows throughout his voyages, his character lacks basic greatness. This impression could be due to the fact that he rarely shows his feelings, reveals his soul, or experiences great passions of any sort. But other literary adventurers, like Odysseus in Homer's Odyssey, seem heroic without being particularly open about their emotions.

What seems most lacking in Gulliver is not courage or feelings, but drive. One modern critic has described Gulliver as possessing the smallest will in all of Western literature: he is simply devoid of a sense of mission, a goal that would make his wandering into a quest. Odysseus's goal is to get home again, Aeneas's goal in Virgil's Aeneid is to found Rome, but Gulliver's goal on his sea voyage is uncertain. He says that he needs to make some money after the failure of his business, but he rarely mentions finances throughout the work and indeed almost never even mentions home. He has no awareness of any greatness in what he is doing or what he is working toward. In short, he has no aspirations. When he leaves home on his travels for the first time, he gives no impression that he regards himself as undertaking a great endeavor or embarking on a thrilling new challenge.

We may also note Gulliver's lack of ingenuity and savvy. Other great travelers, such as Odysseus, get themselves out of dangerous situations by exercising their wit and ability to trick others. Gulliver seems too dull for any battles of wit and too unimaginative to think up tricks, and thus he ends up being passive in most of the situations in which he finds himself. He is held captive several times throughout his voyages, but he is never once released through his own stratagems, relying instead on chance factors for his liberation. Once presented with a way out, he works hard to escape, as when he repairs the boat he finds that delivers him from Blefuscu, but he is never actively ingenious in attaining freedom. This example summarizes quite well Gulliver's intelligence, which is factual and practical rather than imaginative or introspective.

Gulliver is gullible, as his name suggests. For example, he misses the obvious ways in which the Lilliputians exploit him. While he is quite adept at navigational calculations and the humdrum details of seafaring, he is far less able to reflect on himself or his nation in any profoundly critical way. Traveling to such different countries and returning to England in between each voyage, he seems poised to make some great anthropological speculations about cultural differences around the world about how societies are similar despite their variations or different despite their similarities. But frustratingly, Gulliver gives nothing of the sort. He provides us only with literal facts and narrative events, never with any generalizing or philosophizing. He is a self-hating, self-proclaimed Yahoo at the end, announcing his misanthropy quite loudly, but every attitude is difficult to accept as the moral of the story. Gulliver is not a figure with which we identify but, rather, part of the array of personalities and behaviors about which we must make judgments.

Narrative Technique in Gulliver's Travels

Jonathon Swift's Gulliver's Travels is an early representation of a novel, resonating both political and social satire. Despite the obvious satirical elements in this text, Gulliver's unreliable narrative voice is a satire within itself. Mocking the travel narratives contemporary of his time, Swift utilizes the narration of Gulliver in order to criticize the native and gullible English men and women who read travel narratives as factual documents despite overt Royalist paraphernalia and overly descriptive aspects.

The text commences with "A Letter from Captain Gulliver to His Cousin Sympson," creating the framework of Swift's satire of contemporary travel documents. Within the very first sentence of this letter Gulliver already states that he urgently published this "very loose and incorrect account of [his] travels". This statement signals to the reader that Swift is purposely conveying his narrator as unreliable and furthermore he writes “ I do here renounce… about her Majesty the late Queen Anne, of most pious and glorious memory.” The statements conjointly set up Swift's satire of the travel narrative with both elements of "loose and incorrect travel accounts, as well as a parody of Royalist paraphernalia.

The unreliability of the narrator runs throughout the text, and is presumably Swift's method of satirize the unreliable narrations of English travelers accounts of their own travels to new lands. In Part I, "A Voyage to Lilliput." Swift writes that when Gulliver first arrived upon Lilliput he "conjectured (It) was about eight o’clock in the evening... was extremely tired...drank |brandyJ..and slept..above nine hours". The most intriguing aspect of this section is that Swift conveys his narrator as overly exhausted, drunk off of brandy, and delirious from his swim to  
shore; therefore, Swift is purposely setting up a narrator who is obviously not in a state of mind where his perception is unclouded. Swift could possibly be satirizing the delusions of the English travelers who were writing back to England at the time, mocking that these captains were also drunk and delirious from their travels, and they quite possibly could be imagining the "wonders" that they described. Anyone who has read Samuel Taylor's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is aware of the effect that the desolation of the sea can have of one's psyche. Swift's inclusion of exceedingly exact measures and time frames is also notable in his attempt to satirize the travel narratives. For example, the narrator was aware of the exact time of day and exactly how long he slept in the temple in which he was to stay in Lilliput which exhaustively explains exact measurement of the gate being “four foot high" and "almost two foot wide," and "a small window not above six inches from the ground". Swift is able to unbelievable measurements into the narrative of his protagonist Gulliver’s previous quotation. Furthermore, Gulliver narrates an entire paragraph concerning the description of the ancient temple in which he was to stay in Lilliput which exhaustively explains exact measurements of the gate being "four feet high” and “almost two feet wide,” and a small window not above six inches from the ground” Swift is able to mock the overly descriptive narratives of his contemporary British travelers by including overly descriptive and unreliable narratives of his contemporary British traveller’s by including overly descriptive and unbelievable measurements into the narrative of his protagonist Gulliver.

The Royalist paraphernalia within Swift's text is equally significant in is parody of travel narrator's unreliability in which English men and women at the time believed as factual. Every instance in which Gulliver says something (or provokes from another) a negative response about England or England's monarchy, Gulliver augments the statement with praise of England and/or the monarchy. For example, in Part Il Chapter VII the narrator uses a pre-verification before he begins to tell a story in which his "noble and beloved country was so injuriously treated" Swift then writes "a strange effect of narrow principles and short views in relation to the King of Brobdingnag's lack of interest in gunpowder. Gulliver's sarcastic tone could not possibly be any more obvious in this line, as Swift utilizes his narrator Gulliver as a representation of England as a morally corrupt and violent society. In this same section, Swift writes that Gulliver will "hide the frailties and deformities of his] political mother, and place her virtues and beauties in the most advantageous light". This statement is further demonstrative of Swift’s opinion of the travel narratives in which the authors continuously praise their mother country, not because they were particularly Royalist Englishmen, but because their travels were funded by the monarchy, and therefore they must bootlick and grovel as much as possible so that their funding continues. Essentially, Swift's Gulliver's Travels is a text compiled of various layers of satire, and Gulliver's narrative voice is satirical within itself. In representing the unreliability of contemporary travel narratives as well as their Royalist Purposes, Swift criticizes the English men and women who naïvely determined them as factual documents.