

Jonathan Swift

Born in Dublin, Ireland in 1667, Swift is widely recognized as one of the greatest **satirists** (writers of **satire**) in the English language. He died in 1745.

Since his father, an Englishman who had settled in Ireland, died before his birth and his mother was unable to take care of him for some time, Swift was dependent upon an uncle for his education. He was sent to Trinity College, Dublin, where he managed, in spite of his rebellious behavior, to obtain a degree. In 1689 he became secretary to Sir William Temple in England. Here Swift also became the teacher of a young girl, Esther Johnson. He called her Stella and when she grew up she became an important person in his life. Stella moved to Ireland to live near him and followed him on his travels to London. Their relationship was a constant source of gossip. According to some speculation, they were married in 1716. Swift had significant relationships with two other women. Stella died in 1728. Swift kept a lock of her hair among his papers for the rest of his life.

Unhappy with his servant-like position in England, Swift returned to Ireland, where he became a priest with the Church of England for a time. However he later resumed his position in England, remaining until Temple's death in 1699. During this period he wrote *The Battle of the Books*, in which he defended Temple's belief that the ancients were superior to the moderns in literature and learning, and *A Tale of a Tub*, a satire on religious excesses. Again disappointment with the advancement of his career sent him back to Ireland.

In the course of numerous visits to London he became friendly with other writers and active in Whig politics. (Politics in the late eighteenth century England could be broadly divided into two opposed groups - Whigs and Tories. The Tories believed in the "divine right of Kings" - that God had chosen the kings to rule. Whigs believed that the King was there at the request and goodwill of the ruling families of the country so could only continue to rule with their approval.) His Whig sympathies were severed, however, when that party demonstrated its unfriendliness to the Anglican Church. He began to write on religious and political issues. Swift became a national hero of the Irish with his bitterly ironical *A Modest Proposal* (1729).

Swift's satirical masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels* appeared in 1726. Written in four parts, it describes the travels of Gulliver to Lilliput, a land inhabited by tiny people whose tiny size makes all their pompous activities absurd; to Brobdingnag, a land populated by giants who are amused when Gulliver tells them about the glories of England; to Laputa and its neighbor Lagado, peopled by misguided philosophers and scientists; and to the land of the Houyhnhnms, where horses behave with reason and men, called Yahoos, behave as beasts. Swift gave to these journeys an air of authenticity and realism and many contemporary readers believed them to be true. Ironically, this satire of human foolishness was later turned into a story for children.

In his last years Swift was paralyzed and suffered a brain disorder, and by 1742 he was declared unsound of mind. Swift had suffered from deafness since the age of 20 and predicted his mental decay when he was about 50, saying to the poet Edward Young when they were gazing at the withered crown of a tree: "I shall be like that tree, I shall die from the top." He was buried in Dublin, beside Stella.

The writer Thackeray said of Swift: "So great a man he seems to me, that thinking of him is like thinking of an empire falling."