

Gulliver's Travels *Jonathan Swift*

Background

Swift was dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin when his novel came out. Since in this book he wrote about well-known political figures, he published the book anonymously. London was buzzing with rumours about the author's identity, as well as those of some of his characters. It didn't take long for people to catch on to the fact that the author was really writing about England. And it also didn't take long for the public to discover that the author was Jonathan Swift. Not only had he been involved in some of the most important and heated political events of the time, but he was also a well-known political journalist and satirist whose style was very distinctive.

THE PLOT

In Lilliput people are six inches high, and Gulliver, in comparison, is a giant, or a "Man-Mountain," as they call him. This section of the novel (Part I) is basically about English politics in the early eighteenth century when the Whigs and Tories were fighting bitterly for control of the country. Gulliver becomes involved with the domestic and international dealings of the Lilliputian government. Laws are made to deal with Gulliver's presence; an official document outlining the terms of his freedom is drawn up. One of these terms is that Gulliver must aid the Lilliputians in their war against Blefuscu (Lilliput represents England, Blefuscu, France). Gulliver seizes the enemy fleet and strides across the harbor with it back to Lilliput. For a short time he's a hero.

But Gulliver intervenes in the peace process, and wins advantages for the Blefuscuans. He urinates onto a fire raging in the palace and saves the royal chambers. However, this and some other made-up charges against Gulliver result in a conviction of high treason (serious crime against the government), punishable by blinding. Gulliver escapes to Blefuscu, then home to England.

Part II, which takes place in the land of Brobdingnag, continues to look at English politics. This time, however, Gulliver is like a Lilliputian among the giant Brobdingnagians and here it is Gulliver who represents English ways. After a short time as a working freak, Gulliver is rescued by the king and queen and lives a life of comfort at court. He spends much of his time learning the language and talking with the king about life in England. The king emerges as a fair, merciful ruler and a very sympathetic and humane man. Gulliver, in contrast, seems as petty and cruel as the Lilliputians.

One day while on an outing with the king and queen, Gulliver's "box" (his house) is kidnapped by a bird (with him inside), and dropped in the sea, and recovered by an English ship. Gulliver stays in England a while with his family then goes back to sea.

In Part III Gulliver goes to the flying island of Laputa and some of its colonies. This is a tour of early eighteenth-century scientific activities and attitudes. His first stop is Laputa, where the inhabitants have one eye turned inward and one eye turned up to the sky- they're thinking always of their own speculations (inward) and of lofty issues in mathematics, astronomy and music (upward). They're so fixated they need "flappers" to box them on the ear to let them know someone is talking to them. The Laputans are so distracted from everyday life that they don't notice their wives having sex with their lovers right in front of them.. The Laputans are despotic rulers who pay little attention to Gulliver. He goes on to the island of Balnibarbi. There Gulliver becomes friendly with Count Munodi, who is the only one on the island who lives in a beautiful, well-built house and whose lands yield crops. The others, the Projectors, are engaged in "advanced" scientific research and follow the most "sophisticated" theories. Consequently their houses are in ruins and their land is unproductive. Gulliver visits the Academy of the Projectors to learn more about them, and witnesses a series of useless, wasteful experiments.

In Glubbudrib Gulliver is able to call up historical figures from the past and converse with them. In Luggnagg Gulliver meets the Struldbrugs, a race of people who live forever. They do not have eternal youth, though, and so grow more weaker and unhappier. Gulliver returns to England before again setting sail.

In Part IV Gulliver ends up in the land of the Houyhnhnms. The Houyhnhnms are horses governed totally by reason. They have created a society that is perfectly ordered, perfectly peaceful (except for the Yahoos), and exempt from the disruption of passion. The Yahoos are humans, but only in outward appearance. The Yahoos are kept in a kennel, and are prohibited from having anything to do with the Houyhnhnms.

Gulliver tries his best to become a Houyhnhnm- he talks like them, walks like them, tries to think and act like them. He's in the difficult position of being neither a Yahoo nor a Houyhnhnm and must leave. Gulliver goes mad in Part IV, and can never reconcile himself to other people, whom he considers Yahoos. Neither can he come to terms with the Yahoo part of himself. Back in England, he buys horses and spends most of his time in the stable. He can barely tolerate the presence of his family, and has as little to do with them as possible. He says that his aim in writing Gulliver's Travels is to correct the Yahoos. Having been exposed to the Houyhnhnms, he feels he is the man for the job.

THE CHARACTERS

Swift's characters aren't the well-rounded, "flesh and blood" characters you usually find in a skillfully written novel. His characters are allegorical; that is, they represent something- an idea, an attitude, - or someone else. It's never simple with Swift. Gulliver, for instance, represents different things at different points in the novel. In Part I Gulliver is decent, and responsible. At times in Lilliput he represents other people. In Part II Gulliver represents a man who becomes as nasty and petty as the Lilliputians.

Swift's allegories are not "black and white". Even the Lilliputians have their good points- they are very clever. And the Houyhnhnms, who have created a perfectly orderly society in which there are not even words to describe anger, lying, and disagreement, have their drawbacks, too. It is a life without passion and, perhaps, humanity.

Keep in mind that in Gulliver's Travels there's no character you can follow as you can a traditional omniscient (all-knowing) narrator. Swift's satire is designed to keep you an independent reader; the characters are meant to stimulate you, not to lead you.

LEMUEL GULLIVER Gulliver is the most important character in this novel. He's the "author" of the Travels, he's your tour guide but also a complex, changing character.

THE LILLIPUTIAN EMPEROR On one level, the Lilliputian emperor represents George I of England. On another level the tiny emperor represents tyranny, cruelty, lust for power, and corruption. He is a timeless symbol of bad government.

THE LILLIPUTIANS IN GENERAL The Lilliputians are tiny creatures, clever and cunning. They have a love of ceremony, and bureaucracy. They are very refined in their manners, but this doesn't prevent them from being small-minded, mean, and vengeful.

THE BROBDINGNAGIAN FARMER He is a poor man who seizes on Gulliver as a way to earn money. Like many who have suffered and who suddenly see an end to their poverty, he's unable to care about the suffering he's imposing on Gulliver.

THE BROBDINGNAGIAN KING This man represents Swift's idea of a just, wise, and strong ruler. For him, force is a measure of absolute last resort, and the notion of gunpowder (of which he'd never heard until Gulliver described it to him) horrifies him. The king has other admirable traits- he's curious, eager to learn, not afraid of the unknown. He spends long hours with Gulliver asking him questions about English and European domestic and public ways, politics, religion, and history.

GLUMDALCLITCH Glumdalclitch is the daughter of the Brobdingnagian farmer. She is Gulliver's nursemaid and loves him and cares for him as her dearest doll.

THE BROBDINGNAGIANS IN GENERAL The Brobdingnagians in general are as ugly to Gulliver as the Lilliputians were physically attractive. However the Brobdingnagian character is much more refined compared to the Lilliputian.

THE LAPUTANS They represent science cut off from the demands of real life, and reason so abstract it is folly.

THE PROJECTORS These are Swift's treatment of certain members of England's Royal Society of scientists and scholars. Their projects, modeled on actual Royal Society experiments done in Swift's time, are absurd and impractical. The Projectors have no regard for tradition; they are concerned only with what's new.

COUNT MUNODI Count Munodi lives in Lagado, land of the Projectors. Unlike them, however, he has great respect for wise traditions of the past.

THE STRULDBRUGS The Struldrugs keep getting older and are probably the most miserable beings alive.

THE HOUYHNNHNS These horses are governed entirely by reason. They have created a society in which there is no crime, no poverty, no disagreement, no unhappiness. Neither is there any joy or passion. Husbands and wives (marriages are arranged according to gene pools) have no more feeling for each other than for anyone else. More than anything, Gulliver wants to be a Houyhnhnm. To him, these creatures represent the human ideal. To Swift, the Houyhnhnms represent what life would be like without the passionate "spice" that makes it worth living. Still, their society is admirable in certain regards.

THE YAHOOs The Yahoos are so startling and unforgettable that the term has stayed in our language. When someone today refers to a person as a Yahoo, he means that that person is less than civilized. To Swift, it meant something far more damning.

The Yahoos in Gulliver's Travels embody the lowest traits in human nature. They are gluttonous, filthy, lustful, thieving, violent brutes. Only physically do they resemble civilized people. They live in kennels and function as the Houyhnhnms' "horses."

To Gulliver they represent mankind. To Swift, they represent what man must strive to overcome. Notice that the Yahoos ended up on the Houyhnhnms' island by accident. A female and a male arrived, and, stranded, never left. The original couple had children, so did their children, etc. Totally cut off from other humans, they degenerated to the level of beasts. It's possible that Swift is saying here that people need to be with other people and experience new ideas to remain civilized.

CAPTAIN PEDRO DE MENDEZ Pedro de Mendez is the captain of the ship that rescues Gulliver when the Houyhnhnms send him away. Mendez is the first person Gulliver has seen in two years. He is extremely gentle, generous, and patient with Gulliver. Not only does he take Gulliver back to Europe, he makes sure he gets special food, clothing, and quarters. He convinces Gulliver to go home to his family, and pays his way from Amsterdam to England.

THEMES

The overarching theme of this novel is the question, 'What is it to be human?' You follow Gulliver through four traumatic voyages, you are exposed to a variety of creatures and situations and systems that help you to form an answer to this question.

HUMAN NATURE IS PETTY The Lilliputians and Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians demonstrate this.

HUMAN NATURE IS GENEROUS AND JUST The Brobdingnagians and Pedro de Mendez are fine examples of generosity and fairness.

MAN IS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN PETTINESS AND MAGNANIMITY There are two ways of looking at this theme: either man is capable of improving himself, or he is not.

THE SIN OF PRIDE IS THE MOST DANGEROUS SIN OF ALL Gulliver at the end is guilty of pride even while he criticises it. He is most like a Yahoo at this moment.

WHAT IS GOOD GOVERNMENT? Contrast the governments of Lilliput and Brobdingnag.

WHAT IS THE PROPER PLACE AND USE OF SCIENCE AND OTHER AREAS OF STUDY? Consider Part III.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF TRADITION? Consider the contempt for tradition among the Projectors in Part III.

WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF RELIGION? Is it a means to attain political power, as in Lilliput? Are religious differences really worth going to war over? Is religion a way in which man might improve himself spiritually?

WHAT ARE THE VALUES OF REASON? Consider not only the most sensible aspects of Houyhnhnm society, but Lilliputian cleverness, Brobdingnagian justice and the kindness and patience of Pedro de Mendez.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITS OF REASON? Think of the dryness of many Houyhnhnm ways. Think, too, of the ways in which Lilliputians and Laputans distort reason and its powers.

Notice that many of these themes contradict each other. Swift was writing to vex you, to startle you into deep reflection, to invite debate.

STYLE

Swift's style is composed chiefly of satire, allegory, and irony. Satire consists of a mocking attack against vices, stupidities, and follies, with an aim to educate, edify, improve. Allegory is a device in which characters, situations, and places have a significance that goes beyond simply what they are in themselves.

POINT OF VIEW

Point-of-view in Gulliver's Travels shifts. As Gulliver travels, his viewpoint changes. Though the novel is narrated by Gulliver, he is not an omniscient (all-knowing) narrator. Because Swift frequently satirizes Gulliver, we must be on our guard against what Gulliver would have us believe. Sometimes Gulliver speaks for Swift, and sometimes he doesn't. Swift's aim in this book is for you to come to terms with your ideas on some important questions regarding humanity and to be aware of the factors that influence your beliefs.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

The novel is written in the form of a travel book. Swift chose this device because travel tends to change our perspective on the world around us. As Gulliver voyages, and we voyage with him, his (and our) viewpoint changes according to the place(s) in which he finds himself and the things that happen to him there. Swift also satirizes travel books in Gulliver's Travels.