

Gulliver's Travels

[Jonathan Swift]

An Overview and Handy Notes

Introduction to Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift (30 November 1667 – 19 October 1745) was an Anglo-Irish^[1] satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer (first for the Whigs, then for the Tories), poet, and Anglican cleric who became Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin,^[2] hence his common sobriquet, "Dean Swift".

Swift is remembered for works such as **A Tale of a Tub (1704)**, **An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity (1712)**, **Gulliver's Travels (1726)**, and **A Modest Proposal (1729)**. He is regarded by the Encyclopædia Britannica as the foremost prose satirist in the English language,^[1] and is less well known for his poetry. He originally published all of his works under pseudonyms—such as Lemuel Gulliver, Isaac Bickerstaff, M. B. Drapier—or anonymously. He was a master of two styles of satire, the Horatian [Horatian satire--After the Roman satirist Horace: Satire in which the voice is indulgent, tolerant, amused, and witty. The speaker holds up to gentle ridicule the absurdities and follies of human beings, aiming at producing in the reader not the anger of a Juvenal, but a wry smile], and Juvenalian [Roman satirist who denounced the vice and folly of Roman society during the reign of the emperor Domitian] styles.

His deadpan, ironic writing style, particularly in A Modest Proposal, has led to such satire being subsequently termed "Swiftian".^[3]

About Gulliver's Travels

It is unusual when a masterpiece develops out of an assignment, but that is, more or less, what happened in the case of Gulliver's Travels. The Martinus Scriblerus Club, made up of such notables as Pope, Arbuthnot, and Gay, proposed to satirize the follies and vices of learned, scientific, and modern men. Each of the members was given a topic, and Swift's was to satirize the numerous and popular volumes describing voyages to faraway lands. Ten years passed between the Scriblerus project and the publication of the Travels, but when Swift finished, he had completed what was to become a children's classic (in its abridged form) and a satiric masterpiece. Swift kept the form of the voyage book but expanded his target. Instead of simply parodying voyage literature, he decided to attack what he considered were people's most conspicuous vices. He makes the abstract become concrete. Ideas are metamorphosed into grotesque, foreign creatures; absurd customs are represented by absurd objects; and the familiar becomes new and surprising.

Summary

Gulliver's Travels is an adventure story (in reality, a misadventure story) involving several voyages of Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon, who, because of a series of mishaps en route to recognized ports, ends up, instead, on several unknown islands living with people and animals of unusual sizes, behaviors, and philosophies, but who, after each adventure, is somehow able to return to his home in England where he recovers from these unusual experiences and then sets out again on a new voyage.

Book I:

The first voyage is to Lilliput, where Gulliver is huge and the Lilliputians are small. At first the Lilliputians seem amiable, but the reader soon sees them for the ridiculous and petty creatures they are. Gulliver is convicted of treason for "making water" in the capital (even though he was putting out a fire and saving countless lives)--among other "crimes."

When the ship Gulliver is traveling on is destroyed in a storm, Gulliver ends up on the island of Lilliput, where he awakes to find that he has been captured by Lilliputians, very small people — approximately six inches in height. Gulliver is treated with compassion and concern. In turn, he helps them solve some of their problems, especially their conflict with their enemy, Blefuscu, an island across the bay from them. Gulliver falls from favor, however, because he refuses to support the Emperor's desire to enslave the Blefuscuans and because he "makes water" to put out a palace fire. Gulliver flees to Blefuscu, where he converts a large war ship to his own use and sets sail from Blefuscu eventually to be rescued at sea by an English merchant ship and returned to his home in England.

Book II:

The second voyage is to Brobdingnag, a land of Giants where Gulliver seems as small as the Lilliputians were to him. Gulliver is afraid, but his keepers are surprisingly gentle. He is humiliated by the King when he is made to see the difference between how England is and how it ought to be. Gulliver realizes how revolting he must have seemed to the Lilliputians.

As he travels as a ship's surgeon, Gulliver and a small crew are sent to find water on an island. Instead they encounter a land of giants. As the crew flees, Gulliver is left behind and captured. Gulliver's captor, a farmer, takes him to the farmer's home where Gulliver is treated kindly, but, of course, curiously. The farmer assigns his daughter, Glumdalclitch, to be Gulliver's keeper, and she cares for Gulliver with great compassion. The farmer takes Gulliver on tour across the countryside, displaying him to onlookers. Eventually, the farmer sells Gulliver to the Queen. At court, Gulliver meets the King, and the two spend many sessions discussing the customs and behaviors of Gulliver's country. In many cases, the King is shocked and chagrined by the selfishness and pettiness that he hears Gulliver describe. Gulliver, on the other hand, defends England.

One day, on the beach, as Gulliver looks longingly at the sea from his box (portable room), he is snatched up by an eagle and eventually dropped into the sea. A passing ship spots the floating chest and rescues Gulliver, eventually returning him to England and his family.

Book III:

Gulliver's third voyage is to Laputa (and neighboring Luggnagg and Glubdugdribb). In a visit to the island of Glubdugdribb, Gulliver is able to call up the dead and discovers the deceptions of history. In Laputa, the people are over-thinkers and are ridiculous in other ways. Also, he meets the Stuldrugs, a race endowed with immortality. Gulliver discovers that they are miserable.

Gulliver is on a ship bound for the Levant. After arriving, Gulliver is assigned captain of a sloop to visit nearby islands and establish trade. On this trip, pirates attack the sloop and place Gulliver in a small boat to fend for himself. While drifting at sea, Gulliver discovers a Flying Island. While on the Flying Island, called Laputa, Gulliver meets several inhabitants, including the King. All are preoccupied with things associated with mathematics and music. In addition, astronomers use the laws of magnetism to move the island up, down, forward, backward, and sideways, thus controlling the island's movements in relation to the island below (Balnibarbi). While in this land, Gulliver visits Balnibarbi, the island of Glubbudrib, and Luggnagg. Gulliver finally arrives in Japan where he meets the Japanese emperor. From there, he goes to Amsterdam and eventually home to England.

Book IV:

His fourth voyage is to the land of the Houyhnhnms, who are horses endowed with reason. Their rational, clean, and simple society is contrasted with the filthiness and brutality of the Yahoos, beasts in human shape. Gulliver reluctantly comes to recognize their human vices. Gulliver stays with the Houyhnhnms for several years, becoming completely enamored with them to the point that he never wants to leave. When he is told that the time has come for him to leave the island, Gulliver faints from grief. Upon returning to England, Gulliver feels disgusted about other humans, including his own family.

While Gulliver is captain of a merchant ship bound for Barbados and the Leeward Islands, several of his crew become ill and die on the voyage. Gulliver hires several replacement sailors in Barbados. These replacements turn out to be pirates who convince the other crew members to mutiny. As a result, Gulliver is deposited on a "strand" (an island) to fend for himself. Almost immediately, he is discovered by a herd of ugly, despicable human-like creatures who are called, he later learns, Yahoos. They attack him by climbing trees and defecating on him. He is saved from this disgrace by the appearance of a horse, identified, he later learns, by the name Houyhnhnm. The grey horse (a Houyhnhnm) takes Gulliver to his home, where he is introduced to the grey's mare (wife), a colt and a foal (children), and a sorrel nag (the servant). Gulliver also sees that the Yahoos are kept in pens away from the house. It becomes immediately clear that, except for Gulliver's clothing, he and the Yahoos are the same animal. From this point on, Gulliver and his master (the grey) begin a series of discussions about the evolution of Yahoos, about topics, concepts, and behaviors related to the Yahoo society, which Gulliver represents, and about the society of the Houyhnhnms.

Despite his favored treatment in the grey steed's home, the kingdom's Assembly determines that Gulliver is a Yahoo and must either live with the uncivilized Yahoos or return to his own world. With great sadness, Gulliver takes his leave of the Houyhnhnms. He builds a canoe and sails to a nearby island where he is eventually found hiding by a crew from a Portuguese ship. The ship's captain returns Gulliver to Lisbon, where he lives in the captain's home. Gulliver is so repelled by the sight and smell of these "civilized Yahoos" that he can't stand to be around them. Eventually, however, Gulliver agrees to return to his family in England. Upon his arrival, he is repelled by his Yahoo family, so he buys two horses and spends most of his days caring for and conversing with the horses in the stable in order to be as far away from his Yahoo family as possible.

Themes

Might Versus Right

Gulliver's Travels implicitly poses the question of whether physical power or moral righteousness should be the governing factor in social life. Gulliver experiences the advantages of physical might both as one who has it, as a giant in Lilliput where he can defeat the Blefuscan navy by virtue of his immense size, and as one who does not have it, as a miniature visitor to Brobdingnag where he is harassed by the hugeness of everything from insects to household pets. His first encounter with another society is one of entrapment, when he is physically tied down by the Lilliputians; later, in Brobdingnag, he is enslaved by a farmer. He also observes physical force used against others, as with the Houyhnhnms' chaining up of the Yahoos. But alongside the use of physical force, there are also many claims to power based on moral correctness. The whole point of the egg controversy that has set Lilliput against Blefuscu is not merely a cultural difference but, instead, a religious and moral issue related to the proper interpretation of a passage in their holy book. This difference of opinion seems to justify, in their eyes at least, the warfare it has sparked. Similarly, the use of physical force against the Yahoos is justified for the Houyhnhnms by their sense of moral superiority: they are cleaner, better behaved, and more rational. But overall, the novel tends to show that claims to rule on the basis of moral righteousness are often just as arbitrary as, and sometimes simply disguises for, simple physical subjugation. The Laputans keep the lower land of Balnibarbi in check through force because they believe themselves to be more rational, even though we might see them as absurd and unpleasant. Similarly, the ruling elite of Balnibarbi believes itself to be in the right in driving Lord Munodi from power, although we perceive that Munodi is the rational party. Claims to moral superiority are, in the end, as hard to justify as the random use of physical force to dominate others.

The Individual Versus Society

All of the cultures in the countries Gulliver visits demand a certain level of conformity from their citizens, whether that means following the rules set up in the royal courts or adhering to broader social conventions. These rules often create problems for people who break them, or for those who

want to break the conventions but feel pressure that prevents them from doing so. For example, Gulliver faces censure and an eventual death sentence in Lilliput because he breaks the rules of court by behaving sympathetically toward the enemy country's ambassadors. Although the Houyhnhnms do not have a royal hierarchy, the master's family faces pressure from friends and neighbors to exile Gulliver for being a Yahoo.

Like many narratives about voyages to nonexistent lands, Gulliver's Travels explores the idea of utopia—an imaginary model of the ideal community. The idea of a utopia is an ancient one, going back at least as far as the description in Plato's Republic of a city-state governed by the wise and expressed most famously in English by Thomas More's Utopia. Swift nods to both works in his own narrative, though his attitude toward utopia is much more skeptical, and one of the main aspects he points out about famous historical utopias is the tendency to privilege the collective group over the individual. The children of Plato's Republic are raised communally, with no knowledge of their biological parents, in the understanding that this system enhances social fairness. Swift has the Lilliputians similarly raise their offspring collectively, but its results are not exactly utopian, since Lilliput is torn by conspiracies, jealousies, and backstabbing. The Houyhnhnms also practice strict family planning, dictating that the parents of two females should exchange a child with a family of two males, so that the male-to-female ratio is perfectly maintained. Indeed, they come closer to the utopian ideal than the Lilliputians in their wisdom and rational simplicity. But there is something unsettling about the Houyhnhnms' indistinct personalities and about how they are the only social group that Gulliver encounters who do not have proper names. Despite minor physical differences, they are all so good and rational that they are more or less interchangeable, without individual identities. In their absolute fusion with their society and lack of individuality, they are in a sense the exact opposite of Gulliver, who has hardly any sense of belonging to his native society and exists only as an individual eternally wandering the seas. Gulliver's intense grief when forced to leave the Houyhnhnms may have something to do with his longing for union with a community in which he can lose his human identity. In any case, such a union is impossible for him, since he is not a horse, and all the other societies he visits make him feel alienated as well.

Gulliver's Travels could in fact be described as one of the first novels of modern alienation, focusing on an individual's repeated failures to integrate into societies to which he does not belong. England itself is not much of a homeland for Gulliver, and, with his surgeon's business unprofitable and his father's estate insufficient to support him, he may be right to feel alienated from it. He never speaks fondly or nostalgically about England, and every time he returns home, he is quick to leave again. Gulliver never complains explicitly about feeling lonely, but the embittered and antisocial misanthrope we see at the end of the novel is clearly a profoundly isolated individual. Thus, if Swift's satire mocks the excesses of communal life, it may also mock the excesses of individualism in its portrait of a miserable and lonely Gulliver talking to his horses at home in England.

The Limits of Human Understanding

The idea that humans are not meant to know everything and that all understanding has a natural limit is important in Gulliver's Travels. Swift singles out theoretical knowledge in particular for attack: his portrait of the disagreeable and self-centered Laputans, who show blatant contempt for

those who are not sunk in private theorizing, is a clear satire against those who pride themselves on knowledge above all else. Practical knowledge is also satirized when it does not produce results, as in the academy of Balnibarbi, where the experiments for extracting sunbeams from cucumbers amount to nothing. Swift insists that there is a realm of understanding into which humans are simply not supposed to venture. Thus his depictions of rational societies, like Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnmland, emphasize not these people's knowledge or understanding of abstract ideas but their ability to live their lives in a wise and steady way.

The Body

Throughout Gulliver's Travels the narrator spends a great deal of time discussing the human body—going so far as to detail his own urination and defecation. In each of the various lands to which Gulliver travels, he comes face to face with excrement. In Lilliput he urinates on the queen's apartment to put out a fire; in Luggnagg the professors work to turn excrement back into the food it began as; in the country of the Houyhnhnms the Yahoos throw their excrement at each other and at him. Looking at the body from new perspectives gives Gulliver a special insight into the body's materiality. When he is relatively small, he can see the minute, ugly details of others' bodies. By looking closely at the body as a material thing and paying attention to what humans do on a daily basis, Swift makes it impossible to look at humans as exclusively spiritual or intellectual beings.

Literature and Language

Gulliver is a reader: "My Hours of Leisure I spent in reading the best Authors ancient and modern, being always provided with a good number of books." He reads whenever he has the time. And on each of the islands he visits, he makes a point of noticing whether the inhabitants write or do not write. The Lilliputians, for instance, write diagonally like the ladies of England. The Houyhnhnms lack a form of writing, but Gulliver spends a great deal of time considering how they pass on their history.

Gulliver is also a master linguist, making him a man of virtually all peoples. On each of the islands he visits, he learns the language quickly, sometimes being taught by learned scholars (as in Lilliput) and once being taught by a young girl (in Brobdingnag). His ability to communicate suggests the value of communication across cultures. Once Gulliver has learned the language of a given society, he visits the King or Queen or Emperor or Governor and discusses politics. This ability to share knowledge is beneficial to both parties.

Narrow-Mindedness and Enlightenment

Throughout his journeys Gulliver comes into contact with several different races of people, all of which are narrow-minded in some way. Many of the peoples are conspicuously narrow-minded, such as the Lilliputians, who have wars over the correct way to cut open an egg. (Such squabbles over unimportant matters are a common object of satire.) Even the Houyhnhnms, who are so revered by Gulliver, cannot believe there are other reasonable ways of living. Much of Swift's satirical focus is on people who cannot see past their own ways, their own power, or their own beliefs. Readers (especially his contemporary readers) can see themselves in some of this satire.

Otherness

Otherness plays a large part in Gulliver's Travels. Throughout his journeys Gulliver never quite fits in, regardless of how long he stays. Partly this is a matter of size. In Lilliput, he is the only giant. In Brobdingnag, everyone else is giant and he is small. Mainly, however, it is a matter of being different and simply from elsewhere. On his final journey, when he is captain and his crew mutinies, they leave him on an uncharted island. In Houyhnhnm, where there actually are human beings, they are disgusting creatures with whom Gulliver certainly cannot relate. Finally, after spending years with the Houyhnhnms and coming to consider them better in every way than humanity, Gulliver is still a human. Yet, his experience has made him an outsider in England, completely disgusted with even his own wife and children.

Perspective and Relativity

Nothing in the world of Gulliver's Travels is purely objective, not even the size and shape of human beings. These differences in perspective are made literal in the appearance of the Lilliputians and the Brobdingnagians, but each land Gulliver visits reveals a society firmly enmeshed in its own point of view with little interest in exploring alternatives. The Laputans see the universe only through the perspective of mathematical probability; the Houyhnhnms limit their perspectives to cold reason, never emotion. All reality is filtered through the lens of each specific society, rendering all understanding of the world—even Gulliver's—totally subjective.

In Gulliver's Travels the reader comes to realize that much in the world really is relative. Gulliver's first journey lands him in Lilliput where he is called the Mountain Man, because the people there are only five to six inches tall. On the other hand, in Brobdingnag, Gulliver is tiny compared to the enormous creatures who find him and keep him as a pet. Gulliver spends a great deal of time pondering this situation when he arrives in Brobdingnag. He writes, "In this terrible Agitation of Mind I could not forbear thinking of Lilliput, whose Inhabitants looked upon me as the greatest Prodigy that ever appeared in the World: where I was able to draw an Imperial Fleet in my Hand I reflected what a Mortification it must prove to me to appear as inconsiderable in this Nation as one single Lilliputian would be among us." Gulliver adds, "Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison."

Perspective and relativity do not only apply to size, however, in Gulliver's Travels. After spending time with the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver considers them above humanity in nearly every way. Returning to England, Gulliver is repulsed by the humans he formerly loved and instead chooses to spend his time in the barn with his horses. The question remains about what in the world is not relative after all; size is relative, but what about space itself? Is time relative in the novel as well? A careful reader will find many universals in the midst of so much cultural relativity.

Travel

The novel is set in the traditional mode of satirical travel literature. Many other classic works use the same device, such as Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Homer's Odyssey. Travel in the case of Gulliver's Travels gives Swift the opportunity to compare the ways of humanity, more specifically those of the English, with several other ways of living. Travel also keeps the story entertaining. It is not often that a person finds a book with four sailing journeys each interrupted by torrential storms, although one should remember that the Age of Exploration in Europe provided many stories of travels and discoveries of new lands and new peoples.

Truth and Deception

Truth and deception are prominent themes in Gulliver's Travels. For one thing, the reader is constantly questioning whether or not Gulliver is a reliable narrator—simply because what he is conveying is so fantastic. Most critics and readers determine that Gulliver is reliable, however. One sign of his honesty is established within the first few pages, when he tells the reader about where he came from. Our comfort with Gulliver's reliability is challenged in the last chapter of the novel, though, when Gulliver tells his readers he cannot tell a lie and swears this oath: "Nec si miserum Fortuna Sinonem Finxit, vanum etiam, mendacemque improba finget," which in English means, "Nor if Fortune had molded Sinon for misery, would she also in spite mold him as false and lying."

Lying does appear within Gulliver's journeys. In Lilliput he learns that for the Lilliputians lying is a capital punishment and is considered worse than stealing. In the country of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver is surprised to learn that the Houyhnhnms have no concept of what it means to lie. Their complete honesty is part of what makes Gulliver decide that they are the noblest creatures on Earth.

Abuse of Power

Gulliver encounters a number of monarchs and leaders, from tiny to giant, from practical to esoteric, and they all take advantage of their superior position in some way. They either demand absolute obedience from their subjects through humiliating rituals, as is the case with the king of Luggnagg who makes his subjects lick the floor, or they exhibit extreme incompetence, as is the case with the Lilliputian king who engages in an ill-conceived war with his neighbors. Even Houyhnhnms, whom Gulliver idealizes, exploit the lesser species of their island, the Yahoos, through extreme prejudice.

Cerebral versus Real World

The cultures Gulliver encounters in his travels either take practicality to an extreme, rendering their practicality impractical, or focus on abstract ideas and pure reason in ways that make life difficult, for their own people or for others. For example, the Laputans are the most scientifically and mathematically advanced culture Gulliver encounters, yet they are unable to craft a decent suit of clothes, and their knowledge of the universe causes them tremendous anxiety. Likewise, the Houyhnhnms' focus on pure reason as the governing principle of their society causes them to miss out on some of the emotional experiences, love in particular, that give life meaning.

Symbols

Lilliputians

The Lilliputians represent the human tendency to consider themselves the most important creatures in the universe, but their tiny size and insignificance in the world as a whole reveals the error in this belief. For example, even after peace has been reached with the neighboring island of Blefuscu, the

emperor is not satisfied with his victory. He wants to enlist Gulliver in continuing the war so he can take over Blefscu. The emperor has little regard for his neighbors because his beliefs differ from theirs, and he thinks his own importance justifies the lives that may be lost if the war continues.

Brobdingnagians

The Brobdingnagians' size magnifies both their best and worst aspects, symbolizing how all humans have the capacity for great good and beauty, as well as ugliness and evil. The farmer's family, Gulliver's first acquaintances in Brobdingnag, illustrate both extreme greed and extreme kindness. The farmer himself has no problem with exploiting Gulliver as a kind of sideshow attraction, to the detriment of Gulliver's health. The farmer's daughter, who Gulliver calls Glumdalclitch, is devoted to Gulliver's care, even leaving her family behind to accompany Gulliver to the royal court so she can protect him.

Laputans

The Laputans, and their ground-dwelling counterparts on Balnibarbi, symbolize the futility of seeking knowledge without the means or desire to put it to practical use. The Laputans eschew most normal human interactions, preferring a life of the mind, puzzling over mysteries of mathematics, physics, and astronomy all day. They are unable to construct sturdy homes, and their ideas often cause them stress, but they continue to pursue knowledge for its own sake. On Balnibarbi, the projectors engage in studies and experiments with the aim of improving the lives of their people, but their understanding of science and other topics is so incomplete that they lack the ability to construct useful experiments or learn anything that might accomplish their goals.

Houyhnhnms

The Houyhnhnms symbolize the rule of rational thinking and the benefits of collective living, but also the loss of individual identity that comes with extreme devotion to reason. While rationality has allowed the Houyhnhnms to construct a culture based on benevolence and friendship, peaceful and harmonious within, they are also overly beholden to the culture's rules and norms. Therefore, a recently widowed Houyhnhnm does not outwardly mourn her husband's passing, but she also does not live long after him. The master and his family have affection for Gulliver but social pressures force them to exile him. The denial of normal emotions prevent a full engagement with life.

Yahoos

The Yahoos symbolize a complete loss of rationality in a primitive state, but they also show how ongoing oppression can drive humans into this primitive state. Ample evidence of their propensity for violence appears in the novel; Yahoos fight one another; they hoard stones; and on one occasion a female tries to sexually accost Gulliver. At the same time, the Yahoos have little and are subject to abuse, enslavement, and rejection by the Houyhnhnms, which introduces a chicken-and-egg

scenario: Are the Yahoos rejected because they are primitive, or are they violent because they have been rejected? Perhaps, as the Houyhnhnms claim, the Yahoos are a lost cause. On the other hand, the Yahoos have very little means for survival, which drives them to extreme measures.

Excrement

In Gulliver's Travels, excrement symbolizes the crude reality of human flesh, a fact Gulliver faces most prominently in the filthy, feces-flinging bodies of the Yahoos. Yet excrement occurs in every other one of his other adventures too: in Lilliput, Gulliver defecates on the floor of his Lilliputian home and urinates on the Lilliputians' burning palace; in Brobdingnag, flies defecate on Gulliver's food and maids urinate in front of him; in Laputia, the projectors attempt to transform human feces back into food. The recurring appearance of excrement anchors the novel in the body's demands, limits, and inelegances, refusing to let its characters float off into the heady realm of purely elegant abstractions.

Clothing

Clothing in Gulliver's Travels symbolizes perspective and thus each population that Gulliver visits sports different garments. The tiny clothes of the Lilliputians differ from the immense clothing of the Brobdingnaggians as their small size endows them with a different view of the world from that of the giant Brobdingnaggians; the Laputians' elaborate robes decorated with astronomical and mathematical symbols are the opposite of the Houyhnhmns' nakedness, as their preoccupations with theory and abstraction are utterly distinct from the Houyhnhmns down-to-earth wisdom. Though Gulliver comes to each country wearing his own clothes, those clothes gradually fall apart and he is outfitted in native garments. Likewise, Gulliver enters each country carrying his own ideas and opinions but, as he immerses himself in the new society, his mindset is shaped by the people around him until his perspective starts to match theirs.

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