

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

BOOKS THREE AND FOUR- UG SEM II

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Human Condition:

Gulliver's Travels is political satire in the form of an adventure novel. Swift creates several fantasy worlds to which his character, Lemuel Gulliver, travels, and where he learns that English institutions, such as the government and social structure, are not necessarily ideal. Swift subscribed to the pre-Enlightenment, Protestant idea that man is by nature sinful, having fallen from perfection in the Garden of Eden. While man is a rational animal, his rationality is not always used for good. Therefore, one should not hold up rationality as the greatest human quality, as many Enlightenment thinkers did. It is the human condition, Swift felt, to sin: to be deceitful, cruel, selfish, materialistic, vain, foolish, and otherwise flawed. Rationality and institutions such as governments, churches, and social structures (schools, for example) exist to rein in man's tendency to sin, to keep him in line.

Part III is a scathing indictment of how Enlightenment thinkers value rationality, science, discoveries, and new ideas over traditional, practical ways of doing things. Note, for example, that only Count Munodi's arm thrives because he does not embrace the Projectors' newfangled ways. Practicality and tradition, Swift believed, have great value. Finally, in Part IV, Swift contrasts the best that man was (in the Garden of Eden before the Fall), represented by the Houyhnhnm, with the debased state to which he can fall, represented by the Yahoo. While Swift suggests that we can never return to that state of perfection, because it is the human condition to sin, we can at least rise above our Yahoo-ness.

Point Of View:

Lemuel Gulliver himself narrates the story of *Gulliver's Travels*, but this first-person narrator is not completely reliable. Though Gulliver is very exact with the details of his travels, and we know him to be honest, sometimes he doesn't see the forest for the trees. Swift deliberately makes Gulliver naive and sometimes even arrogant for two reasons. First, it makes the reader more skeptical about the ideas presented in the book. Second, it allows the reader to have a good laugh at Gulliver's expense when he doesn't realize the absurdity of his limited viewpoint. He certainly sounds foolish when extolling the qualities of gunpowder to the peaceful Brobdingnagians, for example. Also, at the end of the novel, the reader can see that Gulliver has turned into a misanthrope (hater of humanity), but can hear in his voice both here and in the introductory letter to his publisher that he is proud and arrogant in his belief that humans are Yahoos. Because by the end of the book readers are accustomed to being skeptical of Gulliver's perceptions, one can guess that his misanthropy has something to do with his arrogance. Humans simply can't be perfect and if we hold ourselves to that ideal we will hate humanity, but

Gulliver can't see this truth. Swift claimed that it was not he that was misanthropic, but Gulliver, the narrator he created.

Setting:

Although the fantastic lands that provide the setting for *Gulliver's Travels* seem unreal today, modern readers should keep in mind that the settings would not have seemed so farfetched to Swift's contemporaries. The novel was written in the 1720s, and Gulliver travels to areas that were still unknown or little explored during this time. The book was written before the discovery of the Bering Strait between Alaska and Russia, for example, where Brobdingnag is supposedly located. It was also before the discovery of an effective means of measuring latitude, which meant it was very difficult for sailors to navigate and explore new territory accurately.

Travelogues, or accounts of journeys to foreign lands, were very popular at this time, so the reading public was accustomed to hearing of new geographical discoveries. Thus Gulliver's explorations to new lands, while unusual, would have seemed little different than the strange tales of "exotic" lands in America, Asia, and Africa.

Like the travelogues it parodies, *Gulliver's Travels* even provides maps of Gulliver's journeys in the book to lend more truthfulness to the story.

Characters:

Dr. Lemuel Gulliver Dr. Lemuel Gulliver is a medical doctor with an itch to sail the seas rather than make money by cheating his patients—a practice of many of his fellow doctors. He is honest, hardworking, and curious, good with languages (which helps in his travels), and has a well-rounded education. Swift portrays Gulliver as a typical middle-class Englishman of the time, complete with wife and children. In his fictional letters at the front of the book, we see a cranky, eccentric (perhaps crazy?), and misanthropic Gulliver, but the letter from his editor suggests to us that Gulliver is an honest person, well-liked by his neighbors, and hints that we will learn much more about him in the pages that follow. As a character, Gulliver is quite inconsistent. At times he seems to be the mouthpiece for Swift himself, voicing the author's opinions. At other times, he is quite proud and arrogant, even unlikable. Often, he is naive and easily influenced by others. Even his name, "Gulliver," suggests he is gullible. (As for his first name, "Lemuel" is a character in the Bible who is urged by his mother to judge rightly and plead the cause of the poor and needy; morality figures greatly in Gulliver's adventures.) Swift intends for readers to be skeptical about Gulliver's perceptions and morality. Gulliver is a detailed person and seems honest, so we should not doubt his facts. How he interprets those facts, however, is something we should question. In doing so, readers will begin to question their own prejudices and human failings, their own opinions and beliefs, and their own institutions. Gulliver is at first called Quinbus Flestrin (which he translates as Man Mountain) by the Lilliputians, and then is given the honorable title of Nardac by the emperor after he captures the enemy's fleet. The Brobdingnagian girl who takes care of him renames him Grildrig, meaning "little dwarf."

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Brobdingnagians also refer to him as a *splacknuck* after an animal of the region that is about his size. By the end of the book, Gulliver is unmistakably a misanthrope (hater of humankind), preferring the company of horses to humans, even his own family. This "madness" is the result of his fourth and final voyage, in which he was confronted with the imperfections of humanity.

Houyhnhnm Pronounced "Whin-ems," like a horse's whinny, the Houyhnhnm are a race of intelligent horses Gulliver encounters in Book IV. They are different from horses in eighteenth-century England because they are the masters over the humanlike Yahooos who toil for them. The Houyhnhnm have an nearly utopian or ideal society and are unfamiliar with the concepts of lying, deceit, jealousy, or hatred. They love all Houyhnhnm equally, enabling them to choose their partners not according to love or passion but according to genetics—that is, which pairings would produce the healthiest offspring. They school their children communally and govern themselves democratically. Critics have long argued whether Swift presents the Houyhnhnm as an ideal society or whether they, too, are set up for satire. Those who argue the latter view point out how casually the Houyhnhnm treat the death of a spouse or loss of a child. Gulliver admires the Houyhnhnm greatly, but he can never be one of them any more than he can digest their horse's diet. He is a human, and hates this reality, but Swift implies that Gulliver ought to accept his human nature. After all, for all their positive attributes, the Houyhnhnm can't feel passionate love as humans can.

Yahooos The Yahooos are a barbaric race of filthy, repulsive humanoids who live in the country of the Houyhnhnm. They resemble human beings so much that the Houyhnhnm have trouble believing that Gulliver is not one of them. They represent mankind at its very worst. Gulliver begins to use the term "Yahoo" to refer to any human who is barbaric, cruel, and immoral, and later calls all humans "Yahooos."