

Gulliver's Travels

By Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

A Study Guide

Original Title and Byline

Gulliver's Travels was originally entitled *Travels Into Remote Nations of the World*. The author was identified as Lemuel Gulliver, not Jonathan Swift. Swift denied himself a byline not only to make the fictional Gulliver appear to be a real person but also to protect himself from the wrath of the people he was satirizing.

Type of Work

Gulliver's Travels is a novel of satire and adventure which has four main sections, called "books," divided into chapters. Preceding the first book is a message from the publisher, Richard Sympson. It claims that Lemuel Gulliver is a real person known to Sympson. This message is followed by a letter to Sympson from Gulliver. Each of these prolegomena is a fabrication, of course—the work of Swift's mischievous mind—designed to enhance the realistic characteristics of his fictional narrator. Educated adults generally read the book as a satire on current events and social, cultural, religious political trends. Children generally read the book as an adventure story.

Publication of Expurgated and Unexpurgated Editions

The book was published first in 1726 in a shortened edition that deleted passages deemed offensive. A second edition was published in 1735; it contained most, but not all, of the deleted passages. A third edition containing the complete novel was published in 1899.

Settings

The adventures in *Gulliver's Travels* take place between May 4, 1699, and December 5, 1715. Between 1715 and 1720, the fictional main character, Lemuel Gulliver, readjusts to life in England. In 1720, he begins writing an account of his voyages and, in 1727, releases them for publication. The action in the story takes place in England, on the seas, on many strange

islands—including one that travels in the air—and in various countries, including ones unknown and uncharted.

Characters

Lemuel Gulliver: English ship surgeon and accomplished seaman. Gulliver, the main character, narrates the story of his voyages to strange lands with amazing creatures and sights. He is one of five sons of a gentleman with a small estate in Nottinghamshire.

Richard Sympson: Friend of Gulliver who writes an introduction to the story Gulliver tells.

Mary Burton Gulliver: Wife of Lemuel Gulliver and daughter of Edmund Burton, a hosier. While Gulliver travels, she remains at home.

James Gates: London surgeon under whom Gulliver studied medicine.

Abraham Pannel: Captain of the *Swallow*, a ship on which Gulliver served as surgeon for three-and-a-half years.

William Prichard: Captain of the *Antelope*, on which Gulliver travels to the East Indies.

Lilliputians: Inhabitants of the country of Lilliput. They are no more than six inches tall. Their size symbolizes their pettiness and the small-mindedness of many government officials in England and other European countries.

Emperor of Lilliput: Ruler of Lilliput, who calls himself by the august name of Golbasto Momaren Evlame Gurdilo Shefin Mully Ullly Gue. He is a capricious ruler whose physical represents the intelligence of his rule. He has been compared with England's King George I (1698-1727), who ruled from 1714 to 1727. One of the main issues that concern the emperor and his subjects centers on which end of an egg to open first, the big end or the small end. Those who argue in favor of the big end symbolize Roman Catholics. Those who argue in favor of the small end, including the emperor, symbolize Protestants.

Empress of Lilliput: Wife of the emperor. She likes Gulliver but turns against him after he extinguishes a palace fire by urinating on it. She represents Queen Anne (1665-1714), who ruled England from 1702 to 1714. Anne became an enemy of Swift after he published his irreverent *A Tale of the Tub* in 1704. Years later, she slighted him by appointing him to a clergy position in Ireland instead of England.

Skyresh Bolgolam: Lord High admiral of Lilliput. After Gulliver helps the Lilliputians in their war

with the Blefuscudians, Bolgolam--envious of Gulliver's success--becomes his enemy.

Flimnap: Lord High Treasurer of Lilliput, who is highly skilled at dancing on a rope (actually a piece of white thread) stretched above the ground. Flimnap becomes Gulliver's enemy. First, he says the cost of providing Gulliver's needs is a drain on the state's resources. Second, he accuses Gulliver of hanky-panky with his wife after hearing a rumor that the woman visited Gulliver in private. Flimnap represents one of Swift's political rivals, Robert Walpole (1676-1745), who became Britain's first prime minister. Walpole was a Whig; Swift was a Tory.

Reldresal: Lilliput's secretary for private affairs. Although he pretends to be a supporter of Gulliver, he plots against him. Reldresal symbolizes double-dealing politicians.

Blefuscudians: Inhabitants of the country of Blefescu. In size, they resemble the Lilliputians. They favor opening eggs on the big end, in opposition to the position of the Lilliputians, and declare war on Lilliput.

Betty: Gulliver's daughter. By the time he returns home from his first adventure in the land of the Lilliputians, she is married and has children of her own.

Johnny: Gulliver's son. He is in grammar school at the time that Gulliver returns to England from Lilliput.

John: Gulliver's uncle. He leaves Gulliver an estate that yields 30 pounds a year, a sum that helps Gulliver support his family while he goes off on another adventure after returning home from Lilliput.

John Nicholas: Captain of the Adventure, a ship bound for western India on which Gulliver is a passenger.

Brobdingnagians: Inhabitants of the country of Brobdingnag in the Arctic region. They are as tall as church steeples. Because they are so big, Gulliver can see all the imperfections on their skin, which repel him. However, unlike many rulers of Europe, they operate an effective government and live upright lives. Their size symbolizes their government achievements.

Brobdingnagian Farmer: Man who finds Gulliver in a field and hosts him at his supper table.

King of Brobdingnag: Capable ruler who contrasts sharply with corrupt officials in Britain.

Queen of Brobdingnag: Wife of Brobdingnag's king. She treats Gulliver kindly.

Glumdalclitch: Nine-year-old daughter of the Brobdingnagian farmer. She is small for her age—

no more than forty feet tall. She is a kindly child who cares for Gulliver during his stay in Brobdingnag.

William Robinson: Captain of the *Hopewell*, a ship that takes Gulliver to the East Indies.

Laputans: Inhabitants of the flying island of Laputa. They are a race of absent-minded scientists and philosophers. Although they are knowledgeable in astronomy, mathematics, and other subjects, they are woefully lacking in practical knowledge and even attempt to build a house from the roof down. The Laputans represent dreamy idealists who cannot apply the theories they propound.

King of Laputa

Balnibarbian: Inhabitants of the land of Balnibarbi. Balnibarbi's Academy of Projectors develop theories to improve society and apply them without testing them. The results are disastrous.

Lord Munodi: Governor of Lagado, a town in Balnibarbi. Unlike the projectors, he applies tested methods only. The result is that he and the people he governs thrive.

Governor of Glubbdubdrib: Ruler of a tiny island of sorcerers and magicians. He has the power to call anyone from the dead to serve him as he pleases for twenty-four hours. He allows Gulliver to select dead persons to be called forth and to question them. Gulliver chooses Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Caesar, Brutus, and others.

Struldbrugs: Immortal humans who continue to age, suffering endless illness and infirmity.

Robert Purefoy: Surgeon on the *Adventurer*, a ship on which Gulliver is the captain.

Mutineers: Unsavory men who seize control of the *Adventurer*, the ship that Gulliver captains.

James Welch: *Adventurer* crewman who informs Gulliver that the mutineers are setting Gulliver ashore.

***hnhmns:** Intelligent horses who establish an exemplary society in which all members respect one another equally. They are so morally advanced that they never lie or hate. In fact, they do not even understand what lying and hatred are.

Yahoos: Ugly, repulsive creatures in the land of the houyhnhmns. They live like animals but resemble humans. They serve the Houyhnhmns as draft animals. A Houyhnhmns tells Gulliver that "there was nothing that rendered the Yahoos more odious, than their undistinguishing appetite to devour every thing that came in their way, whether herbs, roots, berries, the

corrupted flesh of animals, or all mingled together: and it was peculiar in their temper, that they were fonder of what they could get by rapine or stealth, at a greater distance, than much better food provided for them at home. If their prey held out, they would eat till they were ready to burst; after which, nature had pointed out to them a certain root that gave them a general evacuation."

Don Pedro de Mendez: Portuguese ship captain who rescues Gulliver and treats him well while helping him to return to England.

Plot Summary

.....After serving three-and-a-half years as surgeon aboard the *Swallow*, physician Lemuel Gulliver returns to London. There, he marries and takes on patients. However, because his practice cannot sustain himself and his wife, he goes to sea again to make his living, this time for six years on two different ships. When he returns home again, he opens a practice at a new location, then another. Still his business fails to thrive. He could overcharge his patients, like most other physicians, and enjoy a comfortable living. But because he is honest, he refuses to do so. Instead, he signs on as surgeon on another ship, the *Antelope*, and leaves Bristol, England, on May 4, 1699, on a journey to the South Seas.

.....While heading into the East Indies, the ship encounters a violent storm and sinks. All are lost except Gulliver, who swims to an island. While he sleeps, inhabitants of the island—creatures six inches high at most—bind him. After he awakens, they give him food and convey him to the court of their emperor.

.....Calling him Man-Mountain, the little people keep Gulliver a prisoner for a considerable time. However, when they realize he poses no threat, they free him and teach him their strange language. He learns that the island is a nation called Lilliput. The Lilliputians have two political parties—one for those who wear high heels and one for those who wear low heels. Once the little people accept Gulliver, the king issues a decree on the 12th day of the 91st moon of his reign. It binds Gulliver to duties and services. For example, to speed the arrival of dispatches during emergencies, he must convey in his pocket the message, the messenger, and his horse to the destination. He must also assist workmen in construction projects, measure the boundaries of the kingdom by pacing off the distance along the coast, and serve as an ally in

Lilliput's war with Blefescu.

.....Lilliput and Blefescu, a neighboring country of little people, are mortal enemies because they cannot agree on where to break an egg, on the small end or the large end. Gulliver reports that 11,000 persons have died during the egg wars.

.....In return for his services, the king declares that the "man-mountain shall have a daily allowance of meat and drink sufficient for the support of 1724 of our subjects, with free access to our royal person, and other marks of our favour." The emperor assigns 300 cooks to prepare his food and 300 tailors to make new clothes for him. In addition, the emperor later grants Gulliver's request to walk through their capital city, Mildendo.

.....Blefescu, meanwhile, mobilizes 50 ships for an invasion of Lilliput. In response, Gulliver wades to Blefescu and beaches all their ships, forcing Blefescu to surrender. The mighty hero of the Lilliputians then performs another good deed: When the palace apartment of the empress catches fire, raging out of control and defying efforts by the Lilliputians to extinguish it with their thimble-size buckets of water, Gulliver urinates on the blaze. In three minutes, it dies.

.....But Gulliver the hero becomes Gulliver the villain when the admiral of the Lilliputian navy, Skyresh Bolgolam, schemes against Gulliver. The admiral is jealous of Gulliver because of his success against Blefescu. The high treasurer, Flimnap, joins the scheme. He despises Gulliver because of rumors that his wife had had an affair with Gulliver. Even though Gulliver proves the rumors false. Flimnap and Bogolam, as well as several of their cronies, bring charges of treason and other crimes against the Man-Mountain. His crime is that he "made water" in the palace precincts. He also refused to destroy Blefescu and annihilate its inhabitants. For these offenses, the Lilliputians sentence Gulliver to blindness and starvation. But rather than harming the Lilliputians to save himself, Gulliver simply leaves the island. After obtaining a ship and provisions at Blefescu, Gulliver sets sail and meets a merchant ship that takes him back to England. His experience in Lilliput has a strange effect on him:

When I came to my own house . . . I bent down to go in, like a goose under a gate, for fear of striking my head. My wife ran out to embrace me, but I stooped lower than her knees, thinking she could otherwise never be able to reach my mouth. My daughter kneeled to ask my blessing, but I could not see her till she arose, having been

so long used to stand with my head and eyes erect to above sixty feet; and then I went to take her up with one hand by the waist. I looked down upon the servants, and one or two friends who were in the house, as if they had been pigmies and I a giant.

.....After remaining home two months, Gulliver yearns to travel again and signs on with the *Adventure*, a ship bound for Surat, a city in western India on the Arabian Sea. Before departing, he leaves 1,500 pounds with his wife and two children (Betty, a married daughter, and, John, a boy in grammar school). That sum, coupled with an estate he inherited from his Uncle John, assures that his family will be well cared for.

.....The ship sets sail in June 1702 under the command of Captain John Nicholas. After it rounds the Cape of Good Hope and passes the Straits of Madagascar and then the Moluccas, a storm blows it to unfamiliar waters. At an island, when crewmen go ashore for a new supply of fresh water, Gulliver accompanies them. They go in one direction and he in another. After a short time, he sees the other men rowing back to the ship, chased by a gigantic creature. After they scramble aboard, the ship sails—without Gulliver.

.....When he explores the island, he discovers extraordinary sights: corn 40 feet tall, a hedge 120 feet high, trees reaching to the sky. He arrives at a farm worked by giants as tall as church steeples. When a worker finds him, he takes Gulliver to the house of the farmer, who has a wife, three children, and a grandmother. They treat him kindly and feed him in a dish measuring 24 feet in diameter.

.....One of the farmer's children, a nine-year-old girl, looks after Gulliver during his stay at the farm. She is small for her age, not more than 40 feet tall, but proves a loving companion for him. She and her mother provide a cradle for Gulliver to sleep in, placing it on a high shelf so Gulliver will be safe from rats. Over time, the little girl teaches Gulliver the rudiments of her language and makes him new clothes of fine cloth. She calls him *Grildrig* (a word which means *doll* or *toy* in her language), and he calls her *Glumdalclitch* (which means *little nurse*).

.....Putting Gulliver in a box with windows and a hammock, the farmer takes Gulliver to a nearby town to show him off. Soon, he is the talk of the land, and everybody wants a glimpse of the strange little man. When people come to the farmhouse to look upon Gulliver, the farmer charges them a viewing fee—and he realizes what a treasure he has. Eventually, he takes him

on a tour and ends up in the court of the rulers of the land, Brobdingnag, and the queen buys him for a thousand gold pieces as a present for the king. At Gulliver's request, she agrees to take Glumdalclitch into her service so she can continue to look after Gulliver.

.....At times, Gulliver perceives the Brobdingnagians as a repulsive people, but this perception appears to result from his point of view. Because they are so big and he is so small, he can see inside their pores and the folds of their flesh.

There was a fellow with a wen in his neck, larger than five wool-packs; and another, with a couple of wooden legs, each about twenty feet high. But the most hateful sight of all, was the lice crawling on their clothes. I could see distinctly the limbs of these vermin with my naked eye, much better than those of a European louse through a microscope, and their snouts with which they rooted like swine.

.....At the king's request, Gulliver tells the history of his native land, England. The recitation stupefies the king, for he did not realize that a country could engage in so many abominations—murder, hypocrisy, greed, political conspiracies, etc. The king is especially shocked to hear Gulliver discuss the advantages of a powerful weapon, gunpowder, which can be used to lay waste enemies.

.....After two years in Brobdingnag, the king and queen take Gulliver and Glumdalclitch with them to the southern coast of their realm, where they all stay in a royal palace at the city of Flanfasnic, near the sea. The long journey takes its toll on Gulliver and Glumdalclitch, the former catching a cold and the latter a nasty infection that confines her to her room. Longing to see the ocean once again, Gulliver persuades a page whom he trusts to take him to the ocean so that he may breathe fresh air and thereby alleviate the symptoms of his illness. When they leave, Glumdalclitch bursts into tears, so attached has she become to Gulliver.

.....At the beach, the page sets the box down, and Gulliver opens one of the windows on his box and looks out with "wistful melancholy." Feeling a bit weak from his illness, he tells the page that he will take a nap in his hammock, and the boy closes the window against the cold air. While Gulliver is sleeping, a giant Eagle swoops down, picks up the box, and carries it off. Gulliver, awakened by the movement of the box, surmises that the eagle plans to drop the box on rocks, as it would a turtle, to smash it and eat the contents. But the eagle instead drops the

box on the sea—apparently, Gulliver thinks, because he had to defend his catch against other eagles closing in to share in it. Luckily, an English ship happens by and rescues him. Once more, he returns to England.

.....Ten days after his arrival, the captain of a ship called the *Hopewell* invites Gulliver to serve as surgeon on a voyage to the East Indies in two months. The captain, William Robinson—under whom Gulliver had served on a previous voyage on another ship—promises him double the usual pay and a share in command of the *Hopewell*. Gulliver accepts the offer. The ship sets sail on Aug. 5, 1707, and arrives at Fort St. George in April, 1707, then moves on to Tonquin three weeks later. There, while the captain conducts business, he puts Gulliver in charge of a sloop and 14 men to sail to neighboring islands to do additional business. But after a storm blows Gulliver far off course, pirates capture his sloop. A Dutchman wants to kill him. But a Japanese—showing him more mercy than Gulliver's "brother Christian," the Dutchman—allows him to paddle off in a canoe with a sail and provisions.

.....During his journey, Gulliver encounters an airborne island from which people are fishing. When he cries out for help, inhabitants of the island lower a chain and draw him up. His saviors are singularly odd in their appearance:

Their heads were all reclined, either to the right, or the left; one of their eyes turned inward, and the other directly up to the zenith. Their outward garments were adorned with the figures of suns, moons, and stars; interwoven with those of fiddles, flutes, harps, trumpets, guitars, harpsichords, and many other instruments of music, unknown to us in Europe.

Several of them escort him to the king's palace at the top of the island. Inside, where the king sits enthroned, are all kinds of calculating devices. The king addresses him in a strange language. Gulliver replies in all the language he knows—and cannot be understood. He is then taken to an apartment for dinner with four distinguished persons.

We had two courses, of three dishes each. In the first course, there was a shoulder of mutton cut into an equilateral triangle, a piece of beef into a rhomboides, and a pudding into a cycloid. The second course was two ducks trussed up in the form of fiddles; sausages and puddings resembling flutes and hautboys, and a breast of veal in the shape

of a harp. The servants cut our bread into cones, cylinders, parallelograms, and several other mathematical figures.

.....Gulliver learns that the island—which is $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles wide, 300 yards thick, and 7,737 yards in circumference—is called Laputa. The Laputians navigate their island by means of a lodestone, a magnetic rock with the ability to attract and repel. By manipulating the stone, they can raise and lower the island or make it move horizontally in any direction.

.....The residents of Laputa spend their time doing theoretical mathematics and playing music. Their language is based entirely on these two disciplines. "If they would, for example, praise the beauty of a woman, or any other animal, they describe it by rhombs, circles, parallelograms, ellipses, and other geometrical terms, or by words of art drawn from music," Gulliver says. However, they despise practical geometry. Consequently, their homes are poorly built, having not a single right angle. They are quick to put forth their opinions about politics and public affairs even though, as in Europe, mathematicians have little knowledge of such matters. All of the residents of Laputa live in constant fear that the earth and their island will one day crash into the sun—or that the sun will burn out, resulting in destruction of everything that depends on its light.

.....After requesting to leave the island, Gulliver is lowered to the continent of Balnibari and enters its metropolis, Lagado, where the crops are poorly managed, people wear ragged clothing, and the houses are in bad condition—except for the house of the governor of Lagado. He tells Gulliver that 40 years before, some Lagado residents visited Laputa and came away with a smattering of mathematics that caused them to undertake bold scientific projects and other heady enterprises. They even built an academy in which to carry out their projects. Now every town in Balnibari has an academy, and the people spend most of their time conducting experiments. For example, at the Academy of Lagado, scientists are attempting to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, turn human feces back into food, erect buildings from the roof down, plow farmland with pigs, make marbles soft enough to stuff pillows and pincushions, breed sheep whose entire bodies are bald, and have students learn mathematics by swallowing wafers on which formulas are written.

.....So absorbed in these enterprises are the inhabitants that they avoid taking part in almost

all other activities.

.....After leaving Lagado, Gulliver visits the nearby islands of Glubbudrib and Luggnagg.

.....In Glubbudrib, he meets magicians who conjure up figures from history, such as Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Brutus, with whom Gulliver converses. The magicians even fulfill Gulliver's request to conjure up the whole Senate of ancient Rome. But it is not illustrious generals or statesmen who impress Gulliver the most, as he explains: "I chiefly fed mine eyes with beholding the destroyers of tyrants and usurpers, and the restorers of liberty to oppressed and injured nations."

.....In Luggnag, he encounters a rare sort of person called a Struldbrug, who is blessed with immortality. However, Struldbrugs, who have a red mark on their foreheads above the left eyebrow, do not stay eternally young. Instead, they grow old and develop infirmities.

"Whenever they see a funeral, they lament and repine that others have gone to a harbour of rest to which they themselves never can hope to arrive."

.....Gulliver eventually ends up in Japan. From there, he sails on a Dutch ship to the Netherlands and then returns to England on a small vessel sailing out of Amsterdam.

.....After five months, Gulliver again answers the call of the ocean, this time accepting an offer to become captain of a merchant ship called *The Adventurer*. A young man named Robert Purefoy serves as the surgeon. The ship sets sail from Portsmouth in September of 1710 on a mission to trade with Indians in the South Seas. Many months into the voyage, the crew mutinies and sets Gulliver adrift in a longboat in unfamiliar climes. After reaching the shore of an unknown land, he sees in the soil imprints of the hoofs of horses, cows, and human feet. He discovers later that he is the land of the Houyhnhmns, a race of intelligent horses. In the wilds are repulsive creatures called Yahoos that walk on all fours. Gulliver encounters the Yahoos first.

Their heads and breasts were covered with a thick hair, some frizzled, and others lank; they had beards like goats, and a long ridge of hair down their backs, and the fore parts of their legs and feet; but the rest of their bodies was bare, so that I might see their skins, which were of a brown buff colour.

.....When a herd of these ugly beasts swarm around Gulliver, some of them climb a tree and begin defecating on him. However, they flee when two horses appear, one a dappled gray and the other a brown bay. They observe him cautiously, then feel his clothes and touch him gently. All the while, they seem to communicate with each other. Their behavior is so rational that Gulliver wonders whether they are magicians who changed themselves into horses. When he hears them converse, he repeats some of their words. Before long, he begins to pick up their language. One of them takes him to his house. Inside, in a large room, sat three nags and two mares. Several cows were performing domestic chores. Gulliver concludes that these horses must be wondrously intelligent, for they have trained brute beasts.

.....Gulliver's host then leads him into a courtyard in which several Yahoos—tied to a beam at their necks—are feeding on the the flesh of dead dogs, asses, and cows. When Gulliver observes one of the Yahoos close up, he discovers to his horror that it has the face and figure of a human.

.....One of the horses offers Gulliver a root, which he politely refuses; then he offers him some smelly flesh of an ass, which he also refuses. He likewise declines to partake of hay and oats. However, when Gulliver points to a cow passing by and conveys the idea that he wants to milk it, they take him into the house and a mare gives him a bowlful of milk.

.....During his stay with the Houyhnhmns, Gulliver learns to make pastes and cakes from oats, as well as butter and whey from milk. He also hunts rabbit and makes salads from herbs. In time, he learns to converse with the Houyhnhmns, telling them to their astonishment that in his land people like himself, whom they believe to be a Yahoo, are the rulers; horses are used to carry them on their backs, pull wagons, and race for sport.

.....The day comes, however, when the Houyhnhmns forbid Gulliver from remaining with them, fearing that he might attempt to become a Yahoo leader. He then builds a canoe with a sail made of Yahoo skins and travels to a rocky island, where he finds fresh water and shellfish. While there, he spies a Portuguese ship in the distance. After crewmen go ashore to replenish their water supply, they take Gulliver back to the ship. The captain, Don Pedro de Mendez, treat Gulliver kindly agrees to take him to Lisbon. From there, Gulliver finds his way back to England. But this time, he is not happy to see his native land, for its inhabitants are too much like the

Yahoos. During the first year after his return, he says, "I could not endure my wife or children in my presence; the very smell of them was intolerable; much less could I suffer them to eat in the same room."

However, after five years, he begins to adjust to them.

I began last week to permit my wife to sit at dinner with me, at the farthest end of a long table; and to answer (but with the utmost brevity) the few questions I asked her. Yet, the smell of a Yahoo continuing very offensive, I always keep my nose well stopped with rue, lavender, or tobacco leaves. And, although it be hard for a man late in life to remove old habits, I am not altogether out of hopes, in some time, to suffer a neighbour Yahoo in my company, without the apprehensions I am yet under of his teeth or his claws.

General Themes

.....One may read *Gulliver's Travels* as a satire and as an adventure story.

.....The general theme of the satire is that serious defects afflict society. Politicians, religious leaders, social planners, military tacticians, educators—indeed, all of society's elite—often hamper progress through political machination, aggression, misguided science and art, and out-and-out stupidity.

.....The general theme of the adventure story is that strange and wondrous exploits await people willing to take risks. Gulliver goes to sea again and again—risking the perils of angry weather, pirates, and unfriendly cultures—to escape the familiar and experience the exotic.

Specific Themes

Petty Bickering

The argument between Lilliput and Blefescu over how to break an egg satirizes the often-petty bickering between people and nations that leads to religious intolerance, war, and other types of conflict.

Foolish Experimentation

The Academy of Lagado's ridiculous experiments, such as extracting sunbeams from cucumbers and turning human feces into food, represents (1) time- and money-wasting scientific projects and (2) prideful attempts to take on godlike powers. An example of the former was the allocation of several million dollars by the U.S. Congress in 2009 to study the odor of pig urine. An example of the latter is the attempt by scientists in some societies to clone human beings.

Degrading Behavior

The Yahoos' behavior represents corrupt and repulsive human behavior, such as deviant sexuality, gluttony, college hazing rituals, habitual drunkenness, staging of dog fights, and other shameful activity.

Scatology

The novel frequently centers on scatological acts, such as defecation and urination, to satirize Enlightenment thinkers who took undue pride in their intellectual and rational powers. (The Enlightenment, which began in the middle 1600s and ended in the late 1700s, stressed the pre-eminence of human reason and science in efforts to advance civilization and discover new frontiers of knowledge.) In effect, Swift was telling the elite thinkers that they are no better than the common man. Like a carpenter or a shoemaker, a philosopher farts, sweats, and burps.

Coping With Alienation

On his visits to various lands, Gulliver is an alien among strange and sometimes fearful creatures. Fortunately, he manages to cope. For example, in Brobdingnag-- where every person, animal, and thing are gigantic--he uses his wits to keep himself safe in the presence of domesticated animals.

I have been always told, and found true by experience in my travels, that flying or discovering fear before a fierce animal, is a certain way to make it pursue or attack you, so I resolved, in this dangerous juncture, to show no manner of concern. I walked with intrepidity five or six times before the very head of the cat, and came within half a yard of her; whereupon she drew herself back, as if she were more afraid of me: I had less apprehension concerning the dogs, whereof three or four came into the room, as it is usual in farmers' houses; one of which was a mastiff, equal in bulk to four elephants, and another a greyhound, somewhat taller than the mastiff, but not so large. (Part II, Chapter 1)

Relativity

Gulliver is gigantic in Lilliput but minuscule in Brobdingnag. After arriving in the latter country, Gulliver observes,

Undoubtedly philosophers are in the right, when they tell us that nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison. It might have pleased fortune, to have let the Lilliputians find some nation, where the people were as diminutive with respect to them, as they were to me. And who knows but that even this prodigious race of mortals [Brobdingnagians] might be equally overmatched in some distant part of the world, whereof we have yet no discovery.

Oddly, Gulliver's observation calls to mind the principles behind the relativity theories of science. For example, suppose a passenger is walking in the aisle of a train traveling at fifty miles an hour. Suppose further that a seated passenger in the train measures the walker's speed at three miles an hour and that a stationary observer outside the train measures the walker's speed at fifty-three miles an hour. (The walker passes the outside observer at the speed of his walk plus the speed of the train). So how fast is the walker moving? The answer depends on whether the speed is measured relative to what is inside the train or measured relative to what is outside the train.

Gulliver's observation also implies that the value of such things as a government system, a gem, a human behavior, a musical technique, and so on can be assessed only in relation to

something else. A king or an emperor may claim he is generous to his people, but a comparison of his generosity to that of other kings or emperors could reveal him as miser.

Exploration and Discovery

Like the real explorers from Columbus onward, the fictional Gulliver discovers new worlds. Though his adventures are perilous, they are also exciting, providing him glimpses of different customs, cultures, and peoples. His experiences expand his knowledge and help to enlighten, by way of comparisons, about his own world. By learning the languages of the people he encounters, he also realizes the importance of communicating with foreigners in their native tongue.

Love and Kindness: Their Absence and Presence

Love and kindness are conspicuously absent in many of the lands that Gulliver visits. However, Glumdalclitch, the nine-year-old daughter of the Brobdingnagian farmer, is a major exception. She cares for Gulliver all the while he stays in Brobdingnag and sees to his every need. For example, when Gulliver goes to town with the farmer's family, "She carried me on her lap, in a box tied about her waist," Gulliver says. "The girl had lined it on all sides with the softest cloth she could get, well quilted underneath, furnished it with [a] bed, provided me with linen and other necessaries, and made everything as convenient as she could." Her treatment of Gulliver is untainted by the kind of selfish ulterior motives harbored by adults in both Gulliver's fictional world and the real world in England and other European countries.

Point of View

Gulliver narrates his story in first-person point of view.

Irony and Satire

Swift's major writing tools are irony and satire. As to the former, he relies mainly on situational irony rather than verbal or dramatic irony. In situational irony, a development, a result or an

ending is the opposite of what one expects. For example, one would expect scientists and philosophers to be wise. But on the flying island of Laputa, they are woefully lacking in practical knowledge and even attempt to build a house from the roof down. Satire attacks or pokes fun at vices and imperfections. Throughout the novel, Swift satirizes kings, queens, politicians, military leaders, scientists, and thinks of the real world by implying or directly stating that they are like their counterparts in his fictional world.

Direct Criticism

Sometimes Swift directly attacks humankind, without the subtlety of satire or allusion, as he does in the following passage when Gulliver answers a question posed by a Houyhnhmns leader.

He asked me, "what were the usual causes or motives that made one country go to war with another?" I answered "they were innumerable; but I should only mention a few of the chief. Sometimes the ambition of princes, who never think they have land or people enough to govern; sometimes the corruption of ministers, who engage their master in a war, in order to stifle or divert the clamour of the subjects against their evil administration. Difference in opinions has cost many millions of lives: for instance, whether . . . whistling be a vice or a virtue; whether it be better to kiss a post, or throw it into the fire; what is the best colour for a coat, whether black, white, red, or gray; and whether it should be long or short, narrow or wide, dirty or clean; with many more. Neither are any wars so furious and bloody, or of so long a continuance, as those occasioned by difference in opinion, especially if it be in things indifferent.

The Great Egg Controversy: How It Began

In Chapter 3 of Part 1, "A Voyage to Lilliput," Reldresal, the principal secretary for private affairs in Lilliput, explains to Gulliver how the the great egg controversy began. Here is what Reldresal says:

It began upon the following occasion. It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs, before we eat them, was upon the larger end; but his present majesty's grandfather, while he was a boy, going to eat an egg, and breaking it according to the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the emperor his father published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us, there have been six rebellions raised on that account; wherein one emperor lost his life, and another his crown. These civil commotions were constantly fomented by the monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the exiles always fled for refuge to that empire. It is computed that eleven thousand persons have at several times suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but the books of the Big-endians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of holding employments. During the course of these troubles, the emperors of Blefusca did frequently expostulate by their ambassadors, accusing us of making a schism in religion, by offending against a fundamental doctrine of our great prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth chapter of the Blundecral (which is their Alcoran). This, however, is thought to be a mere strain upon the text; for the words are these: 'that all true believers break their eggs at the convenient end.' And which is the convenient end, seems, in my humble opinion to be left to every man's conscience, or at least in the power of the chief magistrate to determine. Now, the Big-endian exiles have found so much credit in the emperor of Blefuscu's court, and so much private assistance and encouragement from their party here at home, that a bloody war has been carried on between the two empires for six-and-thirty moons, with various success; during which time we have lost forty capital ships, and a much a greater number of smaller vessels, together with thirty thousand of our best seamen and soldiers; and the damage received by the enemy is reckoned to be somewhat greater than ours. However, they have now equipped a numerous fleet, and are just preparing to make a descent upon us; and his imperial majesty, placing great confidence in your valour and strength, has commanded me to lay this account of his affairs before you.

Tone

Swift writes the first part of his novel with playful satire that casts the half-inch-tall Lilliputians as tolerable bumblers. After all, they are almost endearing in the way that they maintain petty rivalries. For example, some Lilliputians wear high-heeled shoes to make them appear more formidable to their political, low-heeled rivals. However, as Swift proceeds further into his story, his satire darkens until finally—when he describes the repulsive Yahoos, who represent the worst of humanity—he becomes a bit of a pessimist and misanthrope. However, Swift always seems to keep in mind the goal of reforming society. Even at the end, when Gulliver loses all hope in humankind, Swift seems to be saying, “This is what will happen to you if you do not change your ways.” Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Swift was not a cynic who gave up on society and humankind but instead a gadfly who bit the carcass of the complacent in order to force it to rise and act.

The Importance of Measurements

Swift uses measurements to unify and support the plot of *Gulliver's Travels*. For example, Books 1 and 2 focus on physical measurements: The Lilliputians are tiny compared to Gulliver, and the Brobdingnagians are gigantic. Books 3 and 4 focus on intellectual measurements: The Laputians are tiny in intellectual achievement compared to Gulliver, and the Houyhnhmns are gigantic. Thus, the story becomes an adventure in size.

Swift also imparts chronological flow to the novel by informing the reader at the beginning and end of each book of the exact date that Gulliver leaves England and the exact date that he returns.

In addition, Swift provides detailed statistics on such diverse topics as how many crewmen serve a ship, how many cooks prepare Gulliver's meals, how many citizens inhabit a certain city, how tall or small a person is, and so on.

Swift's Verisimilitude

In a work of fantasy, a writer creates impossible characters, places, and situations and asks the reader to pretend that they are real. To help the reader in this task, the writer tells his tale in such a way that he makes it seem credible—that is, he gives it “verisimilitude.” *Verisimilitude* is derived from the Latin words *veritas* (*truth*) and *similis* (*similar*). Thus, a literary work with verisimilitude is similar to the truth or has the appearance of truth. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift achieves verisimilitude in several ways:

(1) He tells the story in first-person point of view, assuming the persona of Lemuel Gulliver, to present the tale as though it were an eyewitness account. (2) He gives Gulliver a real-world background. (3) He gives imaginary characters, places, and things at least some real-world characteristics. (4) He infuses many passages with statistics, which—like encyclopedias and almanacs—suggest objectivity and truth. (5) He frequently addresses the reader directly, as if the latter is sitting across the table from him. (In fact, Swift speaks to the reader 48 times during his novel.) This trick helps to make the reader an intimate friend, or confidant, of the author. As we all know, a good friend accepts the word of his comrade. (6) He follows each voyage to an unreal world with a voyage back to the real world.

In the opening paragraph of Chapter 1, Book 1, Swift works hard to establish the fictional Gulliver as a flesh-and-blood Englishman and thus invest him with verisimilitude. Here is that paragraph, with references to real places underlined and statistical or numerical information boldfaced:

My father had a small estate in Nottinghamshire: I was the third of five sons. He sent me to Emanuel College in Cambridge at fourteen years old, where I resided three years, and applied myself close to my studies; but the charge of maintaining me, although I had a very scanty allowance, being too great for a narrow fortune, I was bound apprentice to Mr. James Bates, an eminent surgeon in London, with whom I continued four years. My father now and then sending me small sums of money, I laid them out in learning navigation, and other parts of the mathematics, useful to those who intend to travel, as I always believed it would be, some time or other, my fortune to do. When I left Mr. Bates, I went down to my father: where, by the assistance of him and my uncle John,

and some other relations, I got forty pounds, and a promise of thirty pounds a year to maintain me at Leyden: there I studied physic two years and seven months, knowing it would be useful in long voyages.

And here is a paragraph that appeals to the reader and uses statistics to suggest verisimilitude:

The reader may please to observe, that, in the last article of the recovery of my liberty, the emperor stipulates to allow me a quantity of meat and drink sufficient for the support of 1724 Lilliputians. Some time after, asking a friend at court how they came to fix on that determinate number, he told me that his majesty's mathematicians, having taken the height of my body by the help of a quadrant, and finding it to exceed theirs in the proportion of twelve to one, they concluded from the similarity of their bodies, that mine must contain at least 1724 of theirs, and consequently would require as much food as was necessary to support that number of Lilliputians. By which the reader may conceive an idea of the ingenuity of that people, as well as the prudent and exact economy of so great a prince.

Here is still another passage that addresses the reader:

But at the same time the reader can hardly conceive my astonishment, to behold an island in the air, inhabited by men, who were able (as it should seem) to raise or sink, or put it into progressive motion, as they pleased.

Swift's Ridicule of Travel Writers

Gulliver frequently says he will not "trouble the reader" with detailed descriptions of a particular episode in his travels. Such statements are jibes at travel writers of Swift's day, who tended to inflate their descriptions with a prolixity of insignificant details. The words "I will not trouble the reader" (or similar locutions) occur nine times in the novel to convey the idea that Swift will not trouble the reader with wordiness as travel writers do.

Gulliver's Two Personas

Gulliver appears to have two personas, or identities. On the one hand, he is a bystander observing the follies and vices of cultures that symbolize England, sometimes intervening to correct those vices and follies. In Lilliput, for example, he reports on the follies and vices of the Lilliputians and then intervenes to stop a war. In other lands, however, he sometimes becomes England itself, advocating questionable practices. For example, in Brobdingnag, he becomes the observed, rather than the observer, and seemingly promotes the use of gunpowder as a way to destroy enemies.

Author Information

Jonathan Swift was born on November 30, 1667, in Dublin, Ireland. His father—an Englishman who had moved to Ireland—died earlier that year. Receiving financial assistance from relatives, Swift attended a good school for his basic education and graduated from Trinity College in Dublin in 1686. He lived off and on in England, became an Anglican clergyman, and eventually was appointed dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, although he had lobbied for a position in England. His writing—especially his satires—made him one of the most prominent citizens in Great Britain, and he worked for a time on behalf of Tory causes. His most famous work is *Gulliver's Travels*, a book of satire on politics and society in general. Swift died in Dublin on October 19, 1745

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Study Questions and Essay Topics

Identify modern government leaders whom you believe to be Lilliputian in their thinking.

Write an essay informing the reader of foolhardy scientific experiments (boondoggles) that the U.S. government (or any other government) is considering or has approved.

Can *Gulliver's Travels* be compared in any way with the TV series *Star Trek*?

In your opinion, which episode in *Gulliver's Travels* was the most entertaining? Explain your answer.

In your opinion, which episode in Gulliver's Travels was the most effective in enlightening you about the flaws and follies of governments and their leaders? Explain your answer.

Write a satirical essay or short story on a subject of your choice.

Gulliver's facility for learning new languages serves him well on his voyages. Write an essay that explains how important linguistic skill is in today's world. In your essay, you may wish to consider how knowledge of foreign languages promotes success in business and commerce, military endeavors, and diplomacy. You may also wish to consider how it helps people to understand other cultures (ancient as well as modern), learn the meaning of legal and scientific terms, and act in plays or sing in operas,