GULLIVER’S TRAVELS
by Jonathan Swift
INDICE

.1. Some keywords

.2. About the Author, Jonathan Swift.

.3. The Themes of Gulliver’s Travels

.4. A Satire on the Adventure Novel Itself

.5. Books One & Two

.6. Book Three

.7. Book Four
1.

SOME KEYWORDS
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*Famine* (Carestia):
Extreme hunger and starvation of a population.

*Propaganda*:
The spreading of ideas and information with the aim of helping or harming the cause of a political party.

*Benevolent* (Benevolo):
If you are kind, generous and caring all at once, someone could describe you as acting in a benevolent way.

*Misanthrope* (Misantropo):
Someone who hates the human race.

*Satire* (Satira):
A literary style that uses techniques like parody (parodia), irony (ironia) and sarcasm (sarcasmo) in order to comment on, or make fun of a certain subject. Often, writers of satire will exaggerate, ridicule and use humour to encourage a reader to question a familiar idea. That may be a way of living, on how a society works, on the laws that we accept, or a number of many other things. With satire, nothing is off-limits, and its purpose is to improve humanity by criticising human ideas.

*Parody* (Parodia):
A parody is the deliberate copy of a genre or style of writing, usually in a humorous way. A nice way to remember this, is to think of a parrot (un pappagallo) and its ability to imitate human voices, songs and anything else it might hear. It is the nature of a parrot to ‘parody’ everything it encounters.

*Humility* (Umiltà):
To act in a humble way. Humble meaning to not be arrogant or proud, to be modest and put others before yourself. In other words to not think the world of yourself!

*Morality* (Moralità):
In a nutshell, morality is what rules your own mind when you think of good and bad. To act in a ‘moral’ way is to behave in a kind and compassionate way.
2.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, JONATHAN SWIFT
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In Dublin, Ireland on the 30th November 1667, Jonathan Swift was born in the wake of a century that had seen an incredible amount of bloodshed between the English and the Irish. Ireland was ruled by England – and to say it wasn’t happy about that would be a severe understatement! – the English had decided that being Protestant was the only acceptable practice of Christian worship, and to be a Catholic was punishable by death. Ireland had suffered greatly, not only a victim of great violence but also to a series of forced famines – in which the English purposefully starved them.

Just over a decade before Swift’s birth, King Cromwell of England had successfully squashed another Irish rebellion – and for Swift, this meant he had entered the world at a time of ‘temporary’ peace.

The first twenty years of Swift’s life were spent in education, which started excellently in Kilkenny but didn’t end so well when he graduated from The Trinity College in Dublin in 1686. He received a degree by ‘speciali gratia’, which Swift himself explained meant that he was a bad student. The final stages of his life at university were spent under the threat of yet another war, and in 1688, the so-called ‘Glorious Revolution’ happened. The war between the Catholics and the Protestants began as before, and Ireland (once again) was to be the battlefield.

Swift, like many others, fled Ireland and in 1689, he found work in England as a secretary to a Sir William Temple - a retired politician. Temple became something of a father-figure to Swift. It is believed that this relationship is responsible for nurturing Swift’s signature style as a writer.

Over the next few years, Swift traveled back and forth between Ireland and England. His religious views were always close to his heart, and he would work with the church for the rest of his life.

Just at the dawn of the eighteenth century, his mentor Sir Temple dies, and Swift is given the job to edit and complete Temple’s writings. In 1701, he publishes Temple’s Miscellanea as well as his own work. By 1704, Swift had published A Tale of a Tub, The Battle of the Books and more – establishing his name as a writer.

Swift’s work with the church as well as his strong political views started to earn him a reputation as a talented and dangerous writer. Nothing was sacred to Swift - he took a stab at anything! The humour, wit and sensitive understanding of the issues he wrote about made him an invaluable author. Swift was a writer who was not afraid to speak the truth to power.

It has to be understood that writers of Swift’s time saw themselves as performing a crucial role in shaping their society and culture. Literature shared a very close relationship with politics and many political parties were after talented writers to help them against their opponents.

By 1710, he had attracted the eye of the Conservative political party in England, commonly known (as they are still today) as the Tories. Swift was invited to write for them and Swift accepted. For a time, he promoted their views and propaganda – which, in turn, transformed
his life. Not only did it mean Swift was comfortable with money, but it also gave him many close relationships with those in power. However, these politicians would discover over the course of Swift’s life, that he was not an animal to be so easily caged. Swift never hesitated in criticising everything – religion, politics, language, culture and most importantly: human nature itself.

• By 1726, Swift published Gulliver’s Travels – which became an instant success, though not without severely dividing opinion. Some called the work a masterpiece, whilst others labelled it as an insult against the human race itself. This may appear to the modern reader as a strong reaction, but during this point of history, it must be appreciated that the popular idea being taught at the time was that human beings were naturally benevolent. Humans were celebrated as an animal of reason – however Swift argued that human beings were not rational animals, but animals capable of learning reason. Man, to Swift, was flawed by nature.

It is no surprise then that Swift stirred powerful reactions and resentments. One of his critics, Thomas Babington Macaulay, even called him a misanthrope (someone who hates mankind). He describes Swift as having ‘a mind richly stored with images from the dung hill’ and ‘a heart burning with hatred against the whole human race’.

“The pamphlets wrote against me would have formed a library.”

• These are Swift’s own words. He was fully aware that he inspired controversy, and even welcomed this response. He lived to provoke, and always with humour where possible.

• His publication of A Modest Proposal in 1729 is evidence of his provocation at its most brilliant and most dark. Published during one of the worst famines in the history of Ireland, Swift offers a solution to the problem of nationwide starvation. The solution is simple: that poor Irish families give their children to the butcher to be eaten as food. A horrifying solution of course – (and not to be taken seriously) –this was Swift’s counter-attack against the English who had led Ireland to such a terrible and desperate state. His message was clear England and its rulers are the ‘real eaters’ – who had been eating away at Ireland, it’s people, resources and culture for decades. It is also makes fun of the language used by the aristocracy at the time when describing the lower and poorer classes, they were often talked about as objects and items to be used – not as real people at all!

• By the 19th October, 1745, Swift is dead. He leaves the world but his legacy lives on – copies of Gulliver’s Travels are still being printed and translated into many different languages to this day!

Still regarded as a master of satire, Swift’s messages and themes even find relevance in the modern world we know today. Swift always wanted to give his readers the gift of wisdom, and the ability to question and judge everything always – especially those things that seem familiar and acceptable. He was all-too-aware of humanity’s flaws and so held up a mirror to our failures in the hope that by highlighting them, his readers might take some valuable lessons as to how to build a better future. Swift’s writing can seem cruel and heartless at times, yet this style should not blind the reader to the simple fact: Swift always delivered his messages with a warm tender heart, and a wicked sense of humour.
3.

THE THEMES OF GULLIVER’S TRAVELS
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‘Whoever commands the seas, commands the world’

This prophecy is not unique and Sir Walter Raleigh is not alone in making it. In fact, it has been predicted time and time again – stretching as far back as Ancient Greece. In the modern world, America controls most of our oceans, and as a result we can see the power and influence it holds over the rest of us.

Before the rise of America however, it was the Europeans who controlled the seas, and England - despite its small size - had established itself as a key player in this world domination. With the military strength of its naval fleet and its growing economic power, England was responsible for the discovery of many new lands, plants, animals and most significantly – entirely new people with their own civilisations, traditions and cultures.

Perhaps it was because of this that many traveller’s tales and adventure novels such as Daniel Defoe’s ‘Robinson Crusoe’ became wildly popular in London. London, at the time, was practically seen as the centre of the world. Thousands of its people were aware of the exotic lands abroad and the many discoveries being made there every day. These types of books seemed to feed a cultural curiosity.

The the only problem was – (that like their readers) - many of these adventure writers had never left London, or indeed set foot on foreign soil. This meant that many ‘facts’ in these books were often ridiculously inaccurate and exaggerated. It was here that Swift spied an opportunity and consequently, created the bizarre adventures of a character called Lemuel Gulliver.
A SATIRE ON THE ADVENTURE NOVEL ITSELF
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Gulliver’s Travels presents itself like many of these adventure novels of the time. Swift imitates the style with such detail, that it becomes obvious from the beginning that Gulliver’s Travels should be read as a complete satire. Gulliver’s name itself is inspired by the word – gullible. Gullible, meaning to accept what you’re told and what you see, without question.

This quality of gullibility was in itself one of the key ingredients in adventure novels of the time. It also perfectly describes the tendency to describe extraordinary events or meetings with strange and alien people, as merely unusual. Swift, an excellent copycat, mimics this perfectly. When Gulliver first discovers the tiny people of Lilliput, he is surprised – however, considering the weight of his discovery – he is not especially shocked.

On one hand, it doesn’t seem so important that fiction be ‘factually correct’, but Swift grew tired of what he saw as lazy writing that made no real attempt to make these fantasies as believable as possible. Swift’s first target was these unimaginative and predictable plots that in his view, plagued the popular novels of the day.

The first instrument Swift has to play with is Gulliver himself. In each book, Gulliver sets out on a voyage at sea, and in each book these voyages go disastrously wrong. Whether he is the victim to storms or pirates, Gulliver always ends up wrecked on a new and unknown land. Despite this, Gulliver describes himself as an experienced sailor – and by the last book, he is even promoted to be the captain of his own ship – even though all the evidence points to Gulliver being terrible at navigating the sea! By painstakingly following the same predictable formula with every voyage, Swift points out the illogical set of rules that many adventure novels followed. Gulliver continues to sail despite all his failures at sea.

This is not the only time Gulliver fails to learn from his mistakes. The message by Swift here isn’t dressed up – he’s taking a deliberate stab at mankind’s refusal to acknowledge and learn from its past mistakes. Actually, the only moment in all of the books where it can be said that Gulliver has learnt any lesson is at the ultimate ending. Gulliver finally returns home, though he is changed forever, and can only see his wife and children as vile and horrible beasts.

Literary scholars have pointed out that this could have been a personal assault on the novel of Robinson Crusoe itself. Swift’s dark but realistic ending stands in direct contrast to the end of Defoe’s novel Robinson Crusoe. At the end of the book, Robinson returns to his home after nearly thirty years spent in complete isolation. Remarkably, has no trouble settling back in to human society.

Yet, the real man who inspired the character of Robinson was a Scotsman named Alexander Selkirk. Selkirk was an actual traveller, sailor and an original castaway. He spent four years alone an island. When he returned to Britain, he never managed to return to his old way of life. Instead, he spent the rest of his years in gloomily in solitude in Scotland. Is this just a playful attack on Defoe by Swift? Or, is his focus on criticising the ‘portrayed realism’ in popular novels?

It’s important to note the mastery of Swift’s satire is that he strikes on many different levels at once. His satire here is anti novel. As seen through Gulliver’s repulsion towards his family, the satire could also be seen anti-human too. These are just two interpretations. The brilliance of Swift’s writing is that it hands you multiple victims of satire all at once.
BOOKS ONE & TWO
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Many point out that these first two books could stand together perfectly as a pair. They compliment each other well with their focus on physical size – the perfect metaphor for feelings of grandness, pride and strength as well as feelings of humiliation and weakness.

The first book sees Gulliver encounter the people of Lilliput. The difference in size is extreme, and it is obvious that Gulliver is physically more powerful. If Gulliver wanted to, he could destroy the Lilliputians with ease, yet he acts as their willing prisoner. This is also a possible metaphor for England and Europe, and how they would typically go about colonising a new land. His gigantic size represents the might that European explorers could unleash, but his peaceful approach symbolises the manner in which these explorers would calm and seduce the people of these new lands (before eventually taking over of course!).

Gulliver’s size also allows Swift to comment on how humans perceive themselves. The Lilliputians tie Gulliver up – if he tried, he could easily snap the ropes – and yet, the Lilliputians believe they can imprison and control him: just how our imagined ideas of how significant and powerful we are may not be so great in reality. In a similar vein, The Lilliputians never see themselves as tiny – instead, they always views themselves as normalized. It is Gulliver who is the freakish giant.

Interestingly, Swift describes in detail how much Gulliver eats and consumes and also how much comes out the other end! A thought is given here as to how much human beings as a species take from the world – and of course, how much they waste they lay on to it in return.

The second book makes an abrupt reversal from the first. Gulliver is in the exact opposite situation this time – instead of being feared and admired as a giant, he is now ridiculed and treated as a minuscule curiosity. It is perhaps a stroke of genius from Swift, that Gulliver – after displaying miniature farm animals for profit at the end of the first book – finds he is the one being put on display this time, and forced to perform in a show for someone else’s profits. If the first book uses Gulliver’s size and peaceful nature to make a comment on the manner in which Europeans first went about conquering a new land, then this second book focuses on how Europe would eventually enslave the citizens of the lands they attempted to colonise. It is also a direct assault on money and greed – the Brobdingnagians, just like the Europeans, are happy to make some quick money when the opportunity arises.

Gulliver’s tiny size means that his sense of pride and importance withers away in this book. In addition, this size means he has a magnified view of the world and he begins to notice flaws he otherwise may not have noticed. Ladies he would usually find attractive, he finds repulsive when he is able to observe their wrinkles and blemishes through a microscopic lens. Put simply, Swift is telling us to double-check the ideas and things that we think of as basically perfect – he invites the reader to think critically, and challenges that any idea or belief can contain flaws when examined in close detail.

All in all, this question of size tells the story of human perception perfectly. We share Gulliver’s feelings of grandness and being more important than others, whilst at the same time - life reminds us of our limitations, and how small and helpless we can feel. The order of these first two adventures is crucial. At first we are shown the exaggerated heights of pride, and then Swift reduces that inflated sense of ego in a spectacular way. Some may see this as an attack from Swift, yet others might see it as a reminder of the value of humility.
6.

BOOK THREE
The third adventure makes a clear departure from the first two. Its focus changes, and it is noticeably more scattered. Gulliver visits many different islands and towns, and Swift’s target has shifted. Instead of looking towards human pride and greed as in the first two voyages, now Swift turns to mocking the scientific pursuits of his time. He is making fun of how seriously we take our quests for knowledge and intelligence, and on a darker note – he draws the readers attention to how these missions can blind us to what really matters.

Power is not shown through physical size here, but through technology. The government of this land live on Laputa, an island that floats in the sky. The island floats above the rest of the kingdom, making it a formidable weapon, but the metaphor at play here is brilliant — the island floating above the kingdom represents the distance between a government and its people. This literal distance in the book is a comment on how the real-world governments rule their people. In fact, the only actual contact the government makes with its people in this land is to send ropes below to collect taxes! The King himself does not understand his people, as he and his family have never set foot on the land below.

This idea of ignorance is played throughout. The scientists have to be hit with a tool called a flapper just to stop them getting lost in their own thoughts. They are so pre-occupied with their own concerns, they do not have time for anyone else. Swift’s message is crystal-clear: these great scientific minds and government ministers are so worried about themselves first — how can they possibly give any thought to the people they apparently represent? Swift’s view on these things isn’t unique — just look around at the modern world, and you can feel this distrust people still feel towards politicians. The separation between the ‘ordinary folk’ and ‘those in power’ still remains.

Swift, of course, goes even further. He examines the ideas that people hold so dear and asks the reader simply — do you know why you believe in this way of thinking or why you follow this or that rule? He makes the suggestion that clinging to rules and ideas without taking a moment to question why, is a dangerous thing. This is presented comically at first — the people of this society all share an odd hatred of right angles. As a result, all of their buildings are built in strange and uncomfortable ways. It’s obvious these homes could be more cosy, but the Laputans are stubborn. Here, we see citizens needlessly clinging to an idea, even though it obviously limits their society and affects them in a negative way.

Just in case that isn’t enough food for thought, Swift stresses the point again. When Gulliver takes a tour through the country’s Royal Academy of Science, he notices they are making crazy and pointless experiments. All of this happens while just outside the walls of the academy, the people of the kingdom are starving. All of the experiments are completely pointless — for example, trying to take the sunlight out of cucumbers. Even if it was successful, what use could it actually be?

The reader is forced to look at their own society and recognise its faults. The statement is simple — all societies have faults and all societies, if left unchecked, can their own worst enemies.
.7.

BOOK FOUR
It would be fair to describe the last book as the bleakest in the series. Gulliver reaches a stage where he no longer cares for mankind. In all of the books, Gulliver is an alien – whether he is too large, too small or simply too reasonable – he never fits in to any of the lands he goes. This time Gulliver’s morality is tested itself. It is also the first time in his adventures, that Gulliver does not want to return home but finds himself desperate to stay. The rule of the books remain the same however: Gulliver cannot stay in this land, his morality and way of thinking is too different.

Gulliver finds himself in a land where he is not among other human beings, however distorted they are by size or culture – but a different species entirely. His hosts in this land are an intelligent race of horses called the Houyhnhnms. The human beings in this land, instead, take on the form of violent and wild creatures known as Yahoos. Swift paints a grim, animalistic self-portrait of mankind here.

Gulliver is disgusted, and finds himself admiring the intelligent horses that rule the land. He adopts their values and beliefs very quickly – so much so, that he begins to view all of humankind as inherently aggressive and horrifying beasts. However, it is not enough. Try as he might, Gulliver is ultimately different from the Houyhnhnms, and he eventually has to leave.

Despite his good behaviour and genuine desire to become one of them, the Houyhnhnms cannot keep him as their guest any longer. He is different, and that’s all that matters. Even this horse race, which has been held up as ideal and peaceful, shares the same flaws of humanity to some degree. Throughout each of the books, close attention has been paid to this idea of difference, and how we treat things that are ‘different’ or ‘unknown’ in certain ways. In the first two books, we see how Gulliver’s differences means he is imprisoned, enslaved and exploited. In the third, we are led to understand the ridiculous characteristics of our own societies, and the differences between those with power and those without. In the fourth, we observe how even a peaceful society isn’t faultless, and they too cannot fully welcome Gulliver on the basis that he is a stranger – different, foreign and unknown.

Is the question posed to the reader here based on how we treat one another in the real world? Is Swift making a point – that we should learn better how to interact with those things that are different to us, even if they at first seem frightening? Swift leaves these answers to his readers. All that can be certain is he wants his readers to judge for themselves and think over these important questions.

This all begins to sound very depressing. Yet, it shouldn’t. Swift did – often brutally – place a spotlight on our failures and mistakes, but only with the heart and desire that it might inspire change. Swift did not hate mankind – it was his love of mankind that made his writings necessary. If you are in any doubt, take note that although Swift describes the Houyhnhnms as these idols of peace and virtue, their society is also painted as dull, and at times joyless. They do not drink and dance with one another, nor do they share great feasts with one another.

What is missing in their society is what makes human society so rich – and that’s the point! The real world does contain greed, corruption and hate. But it also contains generosity, happiness and love. Both dark and light exist together. It is only in a fictional world that anything would be different.
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