

## Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

Dr Beth Swan

Edition used: *Gulliver's Travels*, edited by Peter Dixon and John Chalker, London: Penguin, 1967.

Swift was a satirist and poet, born in Dublin, brought up in England but educated at Trinity College Dublin. When Queen Anne died he returned to Ireland and became a champion of Irish rights. He moved from the Whigs to the Tories because he saw the Whigs as deliberately undermining the established Church.

He is often accused of misanthropy but was rather realistic and practical: he had no high opinion of mankind. However, he was deeply charitable; when in Ireland he gave a third of his modest income to charity. He detested injustice and would not tolerate fools but he had a great sense of humour and had a reputation for practical jokes. He wrote on diverse subjects, including religion, morality, politics, law and the economy. He was a complex man, capable of great cynicism but also deep humanity; some of his work has decidedly coarse elements (he is known for his scatological or 'toilet' humour) but other writings are religious. He stood for common sense and human values and had a keen brain alert to the foibles of his fellow man but the sense of humour to make fun of them rather than simply lambasting them.

### *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

*Gulliver's Travels* is an exploration of man's social and moral nature in non-theological terms, in an allegorical mode and embedded in fantasy. It's deliberately extravagant, making fun of its own mode.

Travel literature was extremely popular in the early eighteenth century, particularly in the 1720s and 30s. Swift is clearly capitalising on this interest in *Gulliver's Travels*, which is a parody of the optimistic travel book. Hence we have a lot of elaborate detail - maps, Gulliver's papers, latitude and longitude of places - such detail was an integral part of contemporary travel literature but it also makes the fictional world seem real.

Swift takes us to unknown worlds, denying us narrative certainty, even confidence in our narrator, satirising our desire for certainty in a world which defies it. He deliberately sets us off balance in order to challenge us to see things differently. The lying narrator is an essential part of this but is also a fictional device to represent the universal loss of innocence, the continuous Fall of Man which we share with Gulliver.

Gulliver isn't designed as a consistent character but as a means of reflecting different possible attitudes; he is the vehicle and sum of certain events. He changes according to his surroundings, which gives him flexibility as a satiric persona but provokes the reader, deliberately frustrating our wish for a three-dimensional hero we can empathise and identify with on a consistent basis, distancing us from Gulliver's perspective. Gulliver represents aspects of human experience. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, a self-reliant and resourceful man making a home for himself in a difficult environment, Gulliver is at home nowhere - he never fits in. In him, we see the alienation of man - Swift makes grim fun of this, not pathos - he refuses to indulge our sentimentality.

### Part 1

The Lilliputians have the charm of the miniature creature with indomitable courage and inventiveness, for example the means used to feed and clothe Gulliver but gradually we see the other side to them - they're as petty as their size would indicate. They're very much political animals, concerned with the survival of their tiny state above all else.

Their physical smallness is symbolic of the moral smallness of man, which is particularly apparent in politics. In its highest form politics enables the small to join together to surpass individual weakness in the communal strength of the state. Yet we become conscious of the pettiness of politics - it's much clearer in a man of 6 ins than 6 ft. The emperor, 'Delight and terror of the Universe'(p.79) no less, is a skit on human vanity - man loves the illusion of grandeur; this becomes particularly clear when we read the royal declaration in chapter 3. Gulliver is affected to an extent and becomes proud of his title of Nardac.

There are a variety of parallels between Lilliput and eighteenth-century England: Blefuscu represents France; Flimnap, the treasurer, is a satiric representation of Walpole, and Gulliver himself parallels Bolingbroke, who ratified the Treaties of Utrecht with the French; the English expressed their appreciation of his efforts for peace by exiling him!

European and Lilliputian vanity are identical; nothing matters but their own political state. Gulliver refuses to enslave the people of Blefuscu and just wades into the sea and tows their fleet away. The Lilliputians reject Gulliver because of his humanity. The Lilliputian emperor has become a tyrant - he's a satiric comment on man's unfitness to exercise power over his fellow humans. It's also a comment on the contemporary British situation with France - one faction wanted to subjugate France; the other, which Swift supported, wanted peace.

The Lilliputians are divided politically into the low heels, equating to the English Whigs and the high heels representing the Tories. One of the Lilliputian prince's heels is higher than the other so he hobbles, a fictional representation of political instability in eighteenth-century England, where the King's son affected loyalty to the left

but leant to the right. In chapter 3 would-be politicians perform ridiculous antics such as rope dancing to get selected for office - an obvious comment on the eighteenth-century system of patronage.

Their petty pride of rank and power becomes clearer when Gulliver loses favour because he puts out the palace fire by urinating on it and when he becomes an embarrassment because of the amount of food he consumes. Gulliver's enemies want him executed but the sentence is commuted to blinding - they act purely according to self interest. Their ruthlessness is underlined by Gulliver's goodness - forewarned by his one friend he doesn't crush the empire out of gratitude for past kindness and escapes to Blefuscu.

There are some good things about Lilliputian society - Gulliver is impressed by their education system because they actually educate women. The thought of educating women may not cause too many ripples today but in Swift's time it was pretty radical; it was commonly believed that women were endangering their health if they studied; in particular, that the reproductive organs could shrivel up! This belief of course carried on into the twentieth century.

The idea of educating women was regarded as almost morally questionable because it was feared that education might lead to a subversion of the natural order which gave men unquestioned dominance. Women's education was usually confined to artistic and linguistic 'accomplishments' and the basic skills required to run a household. Rousseau articulated the views of many in *Emile* (1762): 'The whole education of women should be relative to man...to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time'. Ron Hubbard, the US founder of the Church of Scientology argued in 1980 - yes 1980: 'A society in which women are taught anything at all but the management of a family, the care of men and the creation of the future generation is a society which is on the way out'.

Out of interest, although women were allowed to go to University in the very late nineteenth century, and were allowed to sit degree examinations, they weren't awarded degrees until well into our own century (Oxford first admitted women to degrees in 1920; Cambridge admitted women to full undergraduate status in 1947). It was argued that women didn't need degrees because they were destined for a purely domestic role and wouldn't be going into the professions.

It's very interesting that Swift, often criticised as a misogynist, should appear to be supporting the idea of education for women. Not only are the Lilliputian women educated, they are 'educated much like the males'(ch 6, p.98). Gulliver explains, 'neither did I perceive any difference in their education, made by their difference of sex, only that the exercises of the females were not altogether so robust, and that some rules were given them relating to domestic life'(pp.98-9). What Swift proposes here doesn't seek to destroy traditional gender roles but to expand them in moral, rational terms.

Yet the system is somewhat heartless: parents only see their children twice a year and they're not allowed 'to use any fondling expressions, or bring any presents'(p.98); the system also rigidly enforces the class system in that education varies according to social status and the role children will play in the world. It is, nonetheless, radical in proposing education for all by the labouring classes.

Gulliver takes on a tone of some authority as a self-styled political envoy, studying the institutions of various peoples and in turn explaining English social systems to characters who ask questions appropriate to the criticisms Swift wishes to make. He is an apparently reluctant legal critic, who naïvely tells the reader how corrupt the English judicial system is while ostensibly describing it as positively as any patriotic Englishman can. He admits, 'I would hide the frailties and deformities of my political mother'(p.173) and comments in part four of the narrative that during his discussions with his master, he 'gave as *favourable* a turn as the matter would bear'(p.306).

Gulliver considers the very foundations of English justice: 'Although we usually call reward and punishment the two hinges upon which all government turns, yet I could never observe this maxim to be put in practice by any nation except that of Lilliput'. He states that the Lilliputians 'thought it a prodigious defect of policy...that our laws were enforced only by penalties without any mention of reward'. Their 'image of Justice' has 'a bag of gold open in her right hand, and a sword sheathed in her left, to show she is more disposed to reward than to punish'(p.95). The implicit criticism of the foundations of English law, designed primarily to punish, is evident.

The profusion of tiny details make it difficult for the reader to resist the narrative, fantastic though it may be. We find ourselves believing that Gulliver is debating matters of state with diminutive palace officials just as when they measure Gulliver for a mattress in chapter 2 we find ourselves calculating how many mattresses will be needed and how uncomfortable it all is. We're curious about these tiny people and so get involved in the narrative in spite of ourselves.

Swift juxtaposes the ordinary and everyday with the imaginary and absurd in such a way that we're not always sure what's real and what's not; this destabilising is both amusing and disconcerting. We smile when we read that Gulliver put his cows and sheep into his pockets but the thought of him swallowing these animals whole isn't so amusing.

Their size enables Swift to present the world from a different perspective: the Lilliputians go through Gulliver's pockets and make a list of the contents eg comb, bank notes, hankie and snuff box. We see the world anew - that's the job of the satirist. It's interesting to see what they do and don't recognise: they recognise useful

items such as the comb but not the pistols - quite an indictment on European readers who know all too well what guns are. Swift forces us to look at the familiar with a new eye. We see that money and guns are in one sense absurd - they have no value in themselves but confer power according to the way they're used. Their importance derives from our perception of them, a perception which is as foreign and absurd to the Lilliputians as their view of the world is to us.

In Lilliput Swift introduces us to the problem of perspective, an issue which is central to the book. We, like Gulliver, have bad eyesight - he wears a 'pocket perspective', which he refuses to give to the Lilliputians. Swift uses paradoxes and false perspectives to insist on the relativity of our judgements. The eighteenth century was proud of its rationality; Swift wants to shift us from the complacency of our rationalism.

## Part 2

Lilliput demonstrates the pettiness in man but its force isn't truly felt until we look back from the voyage to Brobdingnag. Gulliver makes comparisons between the two journeys and they're linked by the satiric device of relative size. Gulliver comments, 'Undoubtedly philosophers are in the right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison'(ch 1, p.125). This philosophical idea is at the heart of *Gulliver's Travels* but Swift reveals that however attractive it may be intellectually, it is inadequate. Gulliver seeks to defend himself and his kind later, arguing that 'reason did not extend itself with the bulk of the body'(ch.6, p.167).

In Brobdingnag we see the symbolic consequences of largeness, both moral and physical, with human skin, hair, the act of eating, magnified to the point of grossness. Gulliver argues that English women 'appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own size, and their defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass, where we find by experiment that the smoothest and whitest skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured'(ch 1, p.130). This may be true but it's hardly an intelligent way of looking at people - it leads inevitably to gross distortion. The presentation of the women in this section owes something to the traditional view of woman as an embodiment of vice, with deceit, hypocrisy and immorality hidden behind a fair exterior.

Gulliver's world has now been inverted and his experiences become more nightmarish than simply intriguing; like so many of his adventures, fighting off giant rats with a hanger is both amusing and hideous at the same time. His experiences in Brobdingnag are humiliating. He's treated as a pet - the reader is likely to reject this reductive view of humanity - we like to feel we're more important than animals. It may be that it is Swift's comment on the philosophical views of Thomas Hobbes, still current in the eighteenth century, which argued that man was simply a superior animal. Swift held to the biblical view that man held a special place in the universe because he was made in God's image and given the capacity to reason, gifts which man has defiled by his sin.

Swift exposes aspects of our nature, both moral and physical, which we would rather forget. It's the equivalent of forcing us to think of the various bugs which eat flakes of human skin that collect in beds and on carpets, to look at photos of the bugs blown up so that we can see every unpleasant detail. The picture is ruthlessly honest but its focus is too narrow to tell the whole story - it's another example of the problem of perspective. By focusing in an extreme manner on man as an animal, Swift forces the reader to acknowledge that he is more than that; he is a moral as well as a physical being.

Gulliver describes the human body in unpleasant detail, for example the woman suckling a baby and the maids in waiting. It's unpleasant to see the human body in such detail, as if through a magnifying glass - it's grotesque and unnatural. He describes in unkind detail the lice crawling on their clothes, 'I could see distinctly the limbs of these vermin with my naked eye, much better than those of an European louse through my microscope'. He is divided between disgust and European obsession with science: 'I should have been curious enough to dissect one of them, if I had proper instruments (which I unluckily left behind me in the ship) although indeed the sight was so nauseous, that it perfectly turned my stomach'(ch 4, p.152).

Swift is satirising the natural human fascination with things which repel but he also provides a comment on the practice of science, which often focuses on aspects of the human body as opposed to the whole person. Swift suggests that science is limited in its ability to understand human beings. When the King sends scholars to study Gulliver they examine him minutely - it's humiliating. They can't explain him and so decide he's a trick of nature. Swift is satirising scientific methods and revealing its inadequacies, contrary to the eighteenth-century confidence in science as a means of explaining the world. Swift was hostile to the world of science, which was associated with atheism in the eighteenth century, a search for an alternative way of explaining the world, separate from and often contrary to the traditional Christian view.

The King is a useful vehicle for Swift's satiric wit. He is a good monarch who refuses to separate government and morality, arguing: 'whoever could make two ears of corn...to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would...do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together'(ch 7, p.176). The king asks Gulliver about Europe and Gulliver speaks of Parliament as it's supposed to be, not as it is. Gulliver describes the laws in Brobdingnag as: 'confined...within very *narrow bounds*; to common sense and reason, to justice and lenity, to the speedy determination of civil and criminal causes', all of which, by damning implication, are absent from English law.

Gulliver offers something he believes to be valuable - gunpowder, which the King rejects - it just reaffirms European barbarity. His attack on the army expresses Swift's sentiments as expressed in the *Examiner* essays. Gulliver refers to the King's horrified refusal to accept his offer of gunpowder as 'a nice unnecessary scruple, whereof in Europe we can have no conception'(p.175), which doesn't say much for us!

The King's speech concludes with a metaphor which sums up the insect and animal imagery which has worked throughout the 1st 2 voyages: 'how contemptible a thing was human grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive insects as I'(ch.3, p.146). His indictment on recent European history is damning: 'an heap of conspiracies, rebellions, murders, massacres, revolutions, banishments'(p.172), summing us up as 'the most pernicious race of odious little vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth'(p.173).

Gulliver says that he tried to give a favourable impression, implying that Europe is even worse than the King supposes. Yet we also feel this is an insane way to view mankind - we reject it yet aren't sure where we stand. This is fundamental to the satiric enterprise, which destabilises our view of ourselves.

The giants are physically repulsive to Gulliver but their physical size symbolises moral largeness at times: the best of the Lilliputians are petty but the best of the giants are warm and humane. We see the lasciviousness of the maids of honour, the wretchedness of the beggars with their sores and lice but we also see the compassion and warmth of the King, Queen and Gulliver's protectress, the girl Glumdalclitch. They may represent the goodness, the emotional and moral largeness, which Swift felt man could attain. They're not perfect but as Gulliver admits at the close of the narrative, 'the least corrupted are the Brobdingnagians, whose wise Maxims in Morality and Government, it would be our Happiness to observe'(ch.12, p.341). We may infer that all men are by definition fallen and corrupt and that the Brobdingnagians have made a better job than most. They make Gulliver conscious of mankind's littleness in more ways than one: 'I winked at [ignored / was unaware of] my own littleness as people do at their own faults'(p.190).

In the last chapter of part 2 we learn what Gulliver has brought away with him: needles, pins, a corn and mouse-skin breeches etc - things which aren't worth having except as peculiarities. This provides a satiric comment on eighteenth-century enthusiasm for travel and souvenirs - snippets of other lifestyles which, when removed out of context, seem rather absurd. Gulliver admits at the end of part 1 to an 'insatiable desire of seeing foreign countries'(ch.8, p.117).

### Part 3

The third voyage is a satire on habits of thought and intellectual presuppositions. In chapter 2 we meet the people of the flying island of Laputa. They have one eye turned in on their mental calculations and one turned upward and thus have no means of seeing the outside world. They have difficulty in communication, being immersed in intellectual and philosophical speculation of the kind popular in eighteenth-century England. They are abstract and remote from ordinary life and can only be brought to the realities of life by being hit with an inflated bladder!

Their society is deeply unnatural, which is symbolised by food being distorted into mathematical shapes: 'a shoulder of mutton' is 'cut into an equilateral triangle'. There was much interest in maths in the eighteenth century due to Newton's influence - calculus, light, gravity etc. Gulliver himself starts debating the origins of the name of the island. He isn't a disinterested and objective observer - he is influenced by the different host societies. He becomes involved in their language but his derivation of Laputa is as unlikely as theirs - in fact it comes from the Spanish for prostitute.

Gulliver goes to Balnibarbi which, in contrast to the fruitful Brobdingnag, is uncultivated, with houses in ruin, largely because of the Academy in Lagado, the capital. Gulliver visits the Academy in chapter 5; it functions as a parody of the Royal Society in eighteenth-century England, a scientific institution which did experiments in natural science. The crazy experiments Gulliver mentions, like trying to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, to get gunpowder from ice, actually happened. Contemporary readers would have heard of some of the experiments, some of which were barbarous. Disgust and horror are appropriate reactions; grotesque laughter is the only way to deal with it within the terms of the narrative. Swift is satirising not science *per se* but the misuse of science and the intellect. For Swift, the proper use of the mind is moral and practical.

The experiments are irrelevant to practical or moral concerns, summed up in the 'Universal Artist' which pointlessly converts things into their opposites, turning the useful and vital into the useless and dead, for example sheep without wool. I'll spare your blushes concerning the supposed cure for 'colic' in chapter 5 which involves a pair of bellows!

At Luggnagg, Gulliver faces man's final illusion and it shatters. The immortals represent all that man aspires to in that they are free from what we fear most: death. Gulliver dreams of a noble life of increasing wisdom only to find that immortality may develop man's innate vices, not virtue and knowledge. He paints a terrifying picture of people losing their intellect and becoming increasingly infirm and deformed; immortality may be more terrifying than death. Gulliver begins by referring to death as 'that universal calamity of human nature' (ch 10,

p.253) but admits after talking to the immortals, 'no tyrant could invent a death into which I would not run with pleasure from such a life'(p.259).

#### Part 4

I shall refer to the equine characters of this section as horses for obvious reasons of pronunciation! Their name for themselves means 'the Perfection of Nature' - modesty isn't their strong point! Their reason is as unerring as instinct usually is in animals. Their benevolence is attractive but seems rather strange when we realise that it extends to all species equally, with no particular indulgence for their own kin. Since they are governed by reason, they have no fear of death and do not understand the purpose of lying - it has no part in their society - they don't even have a word for 'lie'; they refer to 'the thing which was not'.

The presentation of the horses is somewhat ambiguous; their cool, passionless existence is monstrous, rationalist, Deist. Yet their life embodies Swift's desire for ease and rest: he was prepared to pay a high price to be relieved of passion - their reason operates by instinct, which would be congenial to Swift. Gulliver and Swift's sentiments concur, although this does not mean that Swift wholly endorses Gulliver or the horses. The point is not so much the horses' merit but human limitation. However, the horses are an ideal satiric mouthpiece because they articulate the view of absolute rationality and so are ideally placed to reveal the irrationality of our activities. From the standpoint of utter reason, little in our government and law can pass uncondemned. Interestingly, the horses have no need of government or law because 'Reason alone is sufficient to govern a Rational creature' - this suggests by implication that man is not a rational being.

Gulliver's explanation of the English Constitution confirms the irrationality of English legal practice. He defines lawyers as men skilled 'in the art of proving by words multiplied for the purpose, that white is black, and black is white, according as they are paid'(p.295). Inverting generally accepted definitions, he argues that the lawyer's role is 'defending falsehood' and that defending just causes is 'an office unnatural', thus attempted 'with great awkwardness, if not with ill-will'. The only way to win a trial, according to Gulliver, is to bribe the opponent's attorney or to make one's cause appear unjust in order to 'bespeak the favour of the Bench'(p.296). The irony may be outrageous but it expresses frustration which still occurs concerning seemingly outrageous judgements.

Swift's comments on Justices and Judges are no more flattering than Fielding's later in the century. Gulliver claims that Judges in Brobdingnag are 'venerable sages and interpreters of the law', concerned with the 'protection of innocence'(p.168). In case the reader has not recognised the comparative deficiencies of English Judges, he later explains that the latter are 'picked out from the most dexterous lawyers who are grown old or lazy, and having been biassed all their lives against truth and equity, lie under...a fatal necessity of favouring fraud, perjury, and oppression'(pp.295-6). Even allowing for the bitterness of Swift's satire, the image presented here is disturbing but not wholly inaccurate, as contemporary readers would have realised.

Gulliver gives an equally cynical interpretation of English legal precedent: 'It is a maxim among these lawyers, that whatever hath been done before, may legally be done again'. Swift's definition is close to the truth but twists it: 'they take special care to record all the decisions formerly made against common justice and the general reason of mankind,' implying that it is a record of successful deceptions rather than a means of directing judgement concerning legal issues a Judge may have little experience in.

Gulliver seems to become a spokesperson for popular eighteenth-century criticisms of the judicial system, for example legal 'jargon': 'this society hath a peculiar cant and jargon of their own, that no other mortal can understand, and wherein all their laws are written...whereby they have wholly confounded the very essence of truth and falsehood'(p.297). He also criticises the duration of cases: Judges 'consult *precedents*, adjourn the cause from time to time, and in ten, twenty, or thirty years come to an issue'(p.297). This was an unfortunate reality for some eighteenth-century legal disputes, which took years to resolve.

Gulliver argues ironically that in England 'In the trial of persons accused for crimes against the state', the 'method is...short and commendable': 'the Judge first sends to sound the disposition of those in power, after which he can easily hang or save the criminal, strictly preserving all the forms of law'(p.297). Gulliver's comments are acidic but not entirely without foundation: the law was not applied in the same way to the upper and lower classes.

Gulliver is taken over by the horses' values - their brainwashing is frightening. As a result, he changes from a good humoured man rather fond of fellow humans to a misanthrope who sickens at the human smell. Yet they're not right - they say Gulliver is worse than the Yahoos because he walks on two legs and so can't be as stable! Pure reason in an extreme form can, ironically, lead to arrant nonsense. They even ignore obvious evidence: Gulliver tells them he arrived by ship but they won't even examine the possibility because Yahoos can't make ships.

The horses embody the notion that animals are better off than humans because they have less to confuse them - they know nothing of evil, pride, lying, fear of death, love etc - they live according to reason and nature. Yahoos are closer to man in their burdens. Swift translates spiritual conditions into physical terms. The stench associated with the Yahoos is emblematic of their moral corruption. Yet they are disconcertingly like us - their habits are cruder versions of our own, for example their passion for jewels, gold, avarice and jealousy but they're

also the most disagreeable creatures he's come across. The horses immediately associate Gulliver with the Yahoos, although they admit he has 'some Glimmerings of Reason'.

Gulliver initially resists accepting his likeness to the Yahoos, using his clothes as the differentiating factor. Gulliver asks not to be compelled to 'expose those Parts that Nature taught us to conceal'. His master replies, 'he could not understand why Nature should teach us to conceal what Nature had given'(ch.3, p.283)', failing to understand the result of the Fall; before the Fall Adam and Eve were not ashamed of their nakedness; after the Fall they became conscious of it and God gave them skins to clothe themselves.

His master's definition of a soldier, based solely on reason, is devastating: a soldier is 'a Yahoo hired to kill in cold blood as many of his own species, who have never offended him, as possibly he can'(ch.5,p.293). Yet however tempting the cynicism, the reader rejects the notion that we are Yahoos - we clearly aren't. They have no reason or speech and no positive emotions. They are close to the warlike 'state of nature' envisaged by Hobbes - nearer the Christian tradition of fallen man than the more optimistic theories of human perfectibility also current at the time. The horses recognise that Gulliver's account of the Europeans is reminiscent of the behaviour of the Yahoos but in more sophisticated form.

Swift offers two possible pictures of man: rationality, embodied in the horses; and bestiality, embodied in the Yahoos. It has been argued that the horses represent what man could be and that the Yahoos are a satiric picture of what man is but this is too simplistic. Gulliver accepts the horses' association of humans with Yahoos; he rejects his own species, even using the skins of Yahoos to make sails. He imitates the horses even when in England; his friends tell him he trots like a horse but he fails to see the absurdity and sees it as a compliment (ch 10, p.327). The Yahoos and horses represent opposite ends of the scale: we must see where we stand in relation to the two.

The horses are deficient - they are arrogant and loveless, live barren lives and are capable of awful things. They represent the problems of pure rationality - humans are higher than this. Yet Yahoos are less destructive than humans - man is both better and worse than the horses. Swift rejects the view of reason being man's superior faculty which must be developed to the exclusion of all else - Gulliver's experience reveals that it's insufficient as an ideal for conduct. Swift rejects the Puritan view that we are shackled to a hideous physical body and that only the soul is valuable. He incorporates our physicality and the abuse of it. Gulliver is terrified of his body and terrified of the female Yahoo. Swift reveals that man must be accepted as a paradox.

Swift gives us some examples of humanity and natural goodness, qualities lacking in the horses. Gulliver, set adrift at sea, is found by Captain Pedro de Mendez, a good and compassionate man who helps him despite his churlishness and insists he ought to return to his own people. Even Gulliver gives him grudging praise, saying he had 'very good human Understanding'. Gulliver seems to see all humans as Yahoos and himself as a sort of honorary horse. He swoons with horror at the touch of 'that odious Animal' his wife and can't tolerate the smell of her or their children for a year (ch 11, p.339). Yet he talks to his horses for at least four hours a day! He shows his addiction to the vice that he castigates above all: pride - 'I here entreat those who have any Tincture of this absurd Vice, that they will not presume to appear in my Sight'(ch 12, p.346).

Gulliver renders himself absurd because he has no self-knowledge: he deludes himself into believing that he's better than others. In some ways he's failed to see the meaning of his own adventures - he hasn't seen that an attempt to live a purely rational life in isolation from one's fellows may not be the best way to attain *human* virtue. Gulliver may be right to condemn much of human life but his insistence that all humans are merely Yahoos causes him to dismiss all humanity as worthless and disgusting. It may be useful to think in this context of Swift's profession of hating abstractions like 'mankind' but loving individuals.

Through exploring the relations of various species, Swift creates a satire on the ways and institutions of Europe and, more fundamentally, provides a satiric investigation of the nature and life of man.

### **To sum up:**

Part 1 is a satire on the pettiness of human nature and a consideration of social issues eg education and politics.

Part 2 satirises human excesses and institutions such as the law and government; hence the creatures are bigger.

Part 3 is a series of satiric vignettes rather than a coherent story - it's a satire on the workings of the mind and how we use - or rather misuse- it - eg maths, science.

Part 4 is a satire on human nature posing the question 'would we rather be humans or horses?'

Fielding claimed in *Tom Jones* that he intended 'to laugh mankind out of their favourite follies and vices'. Swift's satiric muse not only amuses but provokes: he takes our cherished notions about literature and the world around us and turns them on their heads. He criticises the fashionable exotic accounts of foreign lands as morally useless fictions, arguing, 'a traveller's chief aim should be to make men wiser and better, and to improve their minds by the bad as well as good example of what they deliver concerning foreign places'(p.340).

Swift claims, 'my principal design was to inform, and not to amuse thee'(p.340). Yet clearly his intention was to do both; the moral basis for his work is clear but we do have to think about it; Swift unashamedly leaves some of the work to us, leaving 'the judicious reader to his own remarks and applications'(p.341). This is the point

of *Gulliver's Travels*: to make us judicious readers not simply of the narrative but of the truths of human life which underpin it.

© Dr Beth Swan, [www.english-lecturer.co.uk](http://www.english-lecturer.co.uk)