

The Themes of Gulliver's Travels

The main idea of Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" (written between 1720 and 1725, and published in 1726) is an old one, being at least as old as the time of Lucian, a Greek writer of the second century. This satirical fantasy deals with imaginary voyages, in Gulliver's case among the pigmies (Lilliputians), the giants (Brobdingnagians) the moonstruck philosophers (Laputans) and the race of horses (Houyhnhnms), with their human serfs, the Yahoos. In its form as a travel book "Travels" is known both as a delightful children's book and as the most bitter attack on human depravity in the English language. Some of the objects of Swift's scathing satire are politics, court, intrigue, bigotry and human selfishness and cruelty in all their forms.

Swift once said to Pope, "I heartily hate and detest that animal called man", and this book is an elaboration of this attitude. He magnifies man into a giant and then diminishes him into a mannikin, and he finds him wicked and insolent and mean; he regards man in his wisdom and finds him a fool; in despair in the last Book of the "Travels", he turns from man altogether, and in the brute creation he discovers a charity and sagacity before which humanity grovels as a creature beastly beyond measure. The last stages of the book are morbid and often revolting, but always we are aware of the clarity of the author's mind.

In his 4 travels to distant parts of the world, Gulliver discovers that for all their physical and cultural differences, men everywhere are basically the same. Starting out as an easy-going optimist, Gulliver eventually comes to the conclusion that, in the words of the King of Brobdingnag, human beings are "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature even suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." Only a few decent individuals escape Swift's withering condemnation of the human race.

Each country Gulliver visits thinks itself the greatest on earth. But everyone, large or small, apes or horses, suffers from gross human defects. Gulliver, as his name suggests, is gullible, naïve and innocent. But in the course of his travels, he is exposed to the petty, scheming Lilliputians, the gross selfish Brobdingnagians, the abstracted, inhuman Laputans, and the foul, subhuman Yahoos. Even the Houyhnhnms, the most sympathetic creatures in the book are too rational, as their expulsion of Gulliver demonstrates. By the end of his travels Gulliver has become a sadder, wiser man.

Swift believed that man's inhumanity to man is made even detestable because he is capable of reason but either misuses it or does not use it all, and because he takes inordinate pride in himself- a pride hardly justified by his love for war, cruelty, and bloodshed.

Power is the major theme in Lilliput (the country of little minds as well as little bodies or simply a little place). It relates to physical power (Gulliver) and the power of authority. The contrast between the power of gigantic Gulliver who is powerful enough to defeat an entire navy all by himself, and the power of the royal dictums and laws of Lilliput, which Gulliver is forced to obey is constantly projected in the first voyage, and makes for one of the major interrelated themes and ideas of the book. It is surprising that Gulliver takes the trouble to obey the emperor at all, and even submit to his humiliating proposals and conditions, since he has the strength to escape. He is treated as little more than a slave. We wonder why he does not take on himself the power in Lilliput and force the emperor and his top ministers to do his bidding. No doubt Gulliver wishes to project himself as gentle, just, honourable and merciful- a true Englishman- but these qualities, however admirable, also make him seem servile and gullible (as suggested by his name). Of all the places he visits, it is only in Lilliput that the people feel the necessity to make a show of their strength. This points to their sense of inferiority. The Lilliputians as well as the Blefuscutians feel the need to show off their patriotic glories through grand military displays. Their grand parade is silly and absurd.

"Gulliver's Travels" is analysed also from the utopian- dystopian perspective. The alternate books are contrasts to each other. Thus if Lilliput shows human nature negatively, and is dystopian, then Brobdingnag, showing human nature in its grandeur, is utopian. This interpretation, however, has much to be desired, for Swift's vision is not so linear, and encompasses both analyses in all the books.

The parallels with earliest utopian writings – Plato's "Republic" and Sir Thomas More's "Utopia" are also striking, particularly where Lilliput is concerned. Both Plato and More represent societies where the individual is subordinate to the collective interests, and that is also true in the land of Lilliput. In both the "Republic" and "Utopia", children; receive through education except only those of the slaves- the Cottagers and Labourers keeping their children at home. The negative dystopian aspects of Lilliput primarily depend on the size of its inmates. The relative littleness of the people single them out for contempt, however positive many of their social regulations may

be. Their faults are those prevalent in human society whether in the eighteenth century or in the present, bringing up the question of which is the real dystopia-Lilliput or England. Gulliver is not merely big in size , he is big both in heart and mind.