

*Gulliver's Travels*, which was written by Jonathan Swift in 1726, is a timeless classic that is widely regarded as a standard for satirical genius. It is a travel narrative split into four parts, each containing its own separate set of adventures set in fictional, far off lands. More than simply a collection of escapades recounted by the protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, Jonathan Swift uses these stories in order to satirize different aspects of the society he lived in, as well as the nature of human beings in general. This strategy was very indicative of Swift's time, which was marked by a social and artistic movement known as the Enlightenment.

One of the trademark characteristics of this period, particularly in regards to literature, was a satirical tone that called into question many aspects of humanity. This essay will discuss what makes *Gulliver's Travels* a perfect example of some of the attitudes of the Enlightenment period. Specifically, it will discuss the fourth and final book, which many critics consider to be the best and most profound of them all.

The fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* involves Gulliver traveling to the land of the Houyhnhnms. The Houyhnhnms are a race of creatures that appear to be horses in terms of their anatomy. However, they are in fact extremely intelligent and reasonable, far more so than human beings.

The Houyhnhnms are also rulers of another mystical race of creatures known as the Yahoos. Contrary to their horse-like masters, the Yahoos appear to be human, though their similarities to Gulliver end with their physical appearance. The Yahoos are incapable of formulating any complex thought or reasoning, and consequently are extremely emotional and never clothed.

By depicting these seemingly nonsensical characters in part four of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift is doing much more than simply luring the reader in with his humor. The details of these

creatures are at the heart of Swift's biting satire. The Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos are meant to be extreme exaggerations of some of humanity and society's faults. In the scope of Jonathan Swift's illustrious career, he perhaps never captured his satirical goals better. As written in *The Norton Anthology, The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century: Volume C*, "Gulliver's Travels is Swift's most enduring satire...it still rings true today, for its objects are human failings and the defective political, economic, and social institutions that they call into being." (Greenblatt) These strategies and targets are very indicative of the Enlightenment period, a time of self-examination and forward thinking that changed many of the attitudes of human beings throughout all levels of society.

Some of the human flaws and shortcomings that *Gulliver's Travels*, specifically the section dealing with the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos, examines and satirizes is our affinity towards violence, in this case reflected in the extreme behavior of the Yahoos. He also displays the flaws in our greediness, self-righteousness and pettiness. These things are also displayed through the off-the-wall, seemingly animalistic practices of the Yahoos, and are pointed out to Gulliver by the Houyhnhnms, who are the most reasonable of all the creatures. They often find flaws in Gulliver's descriptions of his homeland, especially when it comes to certain societal norms. Through book four's biting satire involving the many flaws Jonathan Swift saw in the nature of human beings, as well as several of our other practices, *Gulliver's Travels* becomes a perfect representative of the attitudes of the Enlightenment period.

Before delving into the strategies used by Swift to satirize society and reflect the Enlightenment, it is necessary to know what exactly the Enlightenment age was. Few have been able to attach a concrete definition accepted by all. However, the one who many agree created the most all-encompassing description of this period of social change was Immanuel Kant, one

of the most important 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment philosophers. In *Journal of the History of Ideas*, James Schmidt quotes Kant attempting to capture what this age really meant for humanity, when he writes, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is man’s inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is... ‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’”(qtd. by Schmidt) Though Kant wrote this definition over fifty years after Swift wrote *Gulliver’s Travels*, it successfully encompasses much of the Enlightenment’s influence on the mentality of human beings. The Enlightenment challenged people to have the courage to question social norms, using reason as the weapon of choice. Everything should be examined and nothing should be readily accepted without first being broken through a reasonable lens. As Erin Mackie writes, “No eighteenth-century writer more insistently and more effectively picked apart the premises and promises of modernity than Jonathan Swift.”(Mackie) This is the world that Jonathan Swift lived in, and these are some of the attitudes that he wished to mock through his satire in *Gulliver’s Travels*.

As stated previously, the mystical land Gulliver ventures to in the fourth and final book is governed by a race of horse-like creatures called Houynhnhs. Their animalistic appearance does not reflect their mental capacity, however. They are incredibly intelligent and rational beings that have championed reason to the fullest extent. The Houynhnhs are portrayed in a very positive light, and are eventually favored by Gulliver. This attitude of making reason the engine of one’s thinking is one of the habits Swift wishes to promote. The Houynhnhs live a much happier life than Gulliver ever has. As Mackie writes, “Living in the pristine simplicity of an agricultural subsistence economy, with their devotion to truth, admirable system of education,

rational schemes of planned parenthood...Houyhnhnms cultivate a life outside of all consumer forms and one in which reciprocity flourishes abundantly..."(Mackie) The Houyhnhnms do not simply utilize reason from time to time. They have championed it thoroughly and completely, making their societal infrastructure and decision-making skills completely void of emotion. As the adage goes, "Never make an emotional decision." The Houyhnhnms are totally detached from each other and things emotionally, making it easy for them to choose wisely as to what will benefit their community the most. They do not mourn death, or become jealous, or seek revenge, for those are all irrational behaviors and are fueled by emotion, something reserved for the Yahoos. Houyhnhnmland runs like a finely tuned machine, and the reason for it is their devotion to rational thinking.

Swift is suggesting that the problems humanity faces stems from the lack of critical reason used to solve critical problems. Political correctness, personal ambition, and petty differences between parties must be thrown aside in order to make the correct decision, a strategy enforced tremendously by the teachings of the Enlightenment.

In terms of satire, Swift is mocking the image of human beings as being superior to all other creatures on earth. After all, in *Gulliver's Travels*, the wisest and most successful beings are in no way human, but appear to be horses instead. With a far greater brain capacity than other animals, we humans still manage to kill each other and harm ourselves (via drugs, alcohol, etc.). Are animals so different? Animals do far less harm to themselves than do humans. From that perspective, animals are actually far more rational than human beings are. Swift urges us to examine this notion through his depiction of the Houyhnhnms.

Another satirical aspect of the Houyhnhnms is their ruling over the far-less civilized and developed Yahoos. As Ann Cline Kelly writes, "Diverse set of individuals- empiricists,

philosophers, animal trainers, and pet owners- resisted and countered...the Chain of Being premise that Nature is a divinely-ordered, eternal hierarchy of essentially different species...humankind is situated just below the angels and...is clearly removed from the rest of animate creation, over which it has dominion.”(Kelly) The Enlightenment served to denounce these beliefs, which held that humans were far and away superior to all other creatures. This original framework gave human beings the right to domesticate and rule over animals. Swift shows how Gulliver is enlightened on the topic, for he originally had an attitude consistent with the Chain of Being premise. Kelly again writes, “...Gulliver gradually comes to an alternative view...Gulliver’s epiphany does not come in a flash but over time with a series of back-and-forth shifts of perspective that reflect the dialectic currents in English discourse concerning the relationship of humans to animals...”(Kelly) The Enlightenment used reason to examine human beings compared to other creatures, revealing that we are actually not as superior and separated from other creatures as we thought we were. What better way to depict this notion than through the wise and powerful horse-like Houyhnhnms ruling over the human-looking Yahoos?

The Houyhnhnms complete superiority over the Yahoos, as well as the humans that Gulliver is accustomed to, lead to him spiraling into a depression upon his return to England. Kelly writes, “...Gulliver’s mental dysfunction results from his tragic realization that that like the Houyhnhnmland Yahoos, humans are essentially irrational and therefore incapable of ever attaining Houyhnhnm virtues.”(Kelly) This reflects some of Swift’s own attitudes towards humanity.

Throughout Swift’s life, he became more and more pessimistic towards the state of human beings. *The Norton Anthology*, states that, “He (Swift) has been called a misanthrope, a hater of humanity, and *Gulliver’s Travels* has been considered an expression of savage misanthropy. It is

true that Swift claimed himself a misanthrope...declaring that, though he loved individuals, he hated ‘that animal called man’”(Greenblatt) His disappointment towards humanity can clearly be seen in *Gulliver’s Travels*, and is especially exemplified in the fourth and final part. The Enlightenment served to quell some of the harmful attitudes that Swift so despised, though there is no doubt that his mastery of satire in this piece played a part in helping human beings have the “courage,” as Kant put it, to use their reasoning for good.

What about the Yahoos? Swift’s satire does not only stem from the wise and lucid Houyhnhnms, though they certainly play a significant role. The Yahoos serve to represent what Swift thinks about the nature of human beings. As stated previously, he did not think much of us. *The Norton Anthology* states that Swift, in a letter to another famous writer of the time, Alexander Pope, defines humans as not an, “...*animal rational* (a ‘rational animal’) but as merely *animal rationis capax* (‘an animal capable of reason’).”(Greenblatt) We are simply animals with more mental capacity, according to him. Reason is not our champion, for we are governed by our emotions, much like the Yahoos. We are “capable of reason,” as he put it, yet it is the exception, not the rule.

As shown in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift was rarely soft or gentle in his satirical style. As Neil Chudgar writes, “The world and its people produced in Swift that savage indignation which, as his epitaph records, lacerated his heart; in his literary works, it is commonly understood, Swift lashed back.” (Chudgar) This “savage indignation” is a term Swift would often use to describe human beings’ attitude towards their lives in general. We can be so much more if we only had the correct mindset, and this angered Swift tremendously. As stated in *The Norton Anthology*, his disappointment was “...provoked by the constant spectacle of creatures capable of reason, and therefore of reasonable conduct, steadfastly refusing to live up to their capabilities.”(Greenblatt).

The Enlightenment period stressed that humans “live up to their capabilities” by using their natural ability to reason, which is what separates us from all other animals that are driven purely by emotion. This ate away at Swift, hence his fierce satire meant to mock the specific traits of the human race he so loathed.

In what ways are the Yahoos different from regular human beings? They do not wear clothing and do not speak any sort of understandable language. They are also much less “capable” of using reason than Gulliver is. Unfortunately, this is where the differences between them and us end.

The Yahoos are constantly fighting over petty disagreements, resorting to violence over any other means of solving problems. This is also a decidedly human trait. They are motivated by self-interest, be it food or riches (sparkling rocks found on the island). The Houyhnhnms do not use any form of money, for one should not have to pay for what is needed, as this would be an irrational, Yahoo-like thing to do. As David Fishelov writes, “In the land of the Houyhnhnms the Yahoos--Swift's debased, animal-like version of the human race--are those that fancy precious stones...The horses are ‘immune’ to human weaknesses,”(Fishelov) Fights over these things will also result in violence, often times murder. The women Yahoos are seductive towards their male counterparts, no matter what their situation is. When the Yahoos become ill, they attempt to create sorts of medicine to heal themselves, though the medicine is composed of their own feces and urine. When Gulliver finally leaves Houyhnhnmland and returns home to his family, he finds that he notices the similarities between us and the bestial Yahoos, making him unable and unwilling to associate with his fellow man.<sup>1</sup> With the potentially harmful ingredients we human beings put in our medicine, the large amount of sexual promiscuity shown by males and females

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Norton Anthology, The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century: Volume C*

alike, and our incessant greed and self-interest, Swift's depiction of the Yahoos forces us as readers to look in the mirror and examine the recurring themes in our lives and in society as a whole. The Enlightenment was a wide spread movement that urged one and all to evaluate the world we live in through reason, something that is strongly enforced in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Jonathan Swift was one of the premier satirists of his day, which was later known as the Enlightenment. His most profound and timeless work proved to be *Gulliver's Travels*, which does not show prejudice in its attack on society. Though this essay simply covered the fourth book, which is also accepted as the most noteworthy, the other three also have their share of targets, including other countries in the United Kingdom, systems of government, social norms, different forms of writing, and many others.<sup>2</sup>

This style of writing is indicative of the Enlightenment, for this was a time that challenged myriad aspects of society that were accepted without sufficient examination. Swift urges us to champion reason, much like the Houyhnhnms did. He reflects many of his own views in his depiction of these horse-like, brilliant creatures. Make reason your source for all decision-making and examination. Challenge what has already been accepted, and avoid the "fierce indignation" he despised enough to put on his gravestone, noting how he is escaping the world that has run rampant with it.

All of the satirical devices present in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* make this work a good reflection of the Enlightenment attitudes Swift adhered to. Though it is continually sharp and unrelenting, Swift was a similar way when asked about these topics. It is effective in sparking self-examination, something instrumental in becoming a part of the Enlightenment.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Norton Anthology, The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century: Volume C*



Works Cited

Chudgar, Neil. "Swift's Gentleness." ELH. Johns Hopkins University Press. (2011): 137-161.

Fishelov, David. "Parody, satire and sympathy in Don Quixote and Gulliver's Travels."

Connotations 12.2-3. 2002.

Kelly, Cline Anne. "Gulliver as Pet and Pet Keeper: Talking Animals in Book 4." ELH, 74.2

(2007): 323-349.

Mackie, Erin. "Gulliver and the Houyhnhnm Good Life". Eighteenth Century: Theory and

Interpretation. 109-116

Schmidt, James. "The Question of Enlightenment: Kant, Mendelssohn, and the

Mittwochsgesellschaft." Journal of the History of Ideas 50.2 (1989): 269-291.

"Jonathan Swift" The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume C: The Restoration and

the Eighteenth Century. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York, (2012): 2464-2633.