

Gulliver's Travels

Gulliver's Travels is a novel by the eighteenth century author, Jonathan Swift. It is story about the virtues and vices of the human race, but it disguises itself as an adventure tale about the travels of Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon, who, because of a series of shipwrecks, ends up on several unknown islands living with people and animals of unusual sizes, behaviors, and philosophies.

Within this story, the people and the countries that Gulliver visits represent the good and bad things about the human race. We call this kind of story an *allegory* – a story where the characters and the situations represent *ideas* about humanity. Jonathan Swift's strategy in writing *Gulliver's Travels* is to show how "small" human beings really are – how they are selfish, vain, prejudiced, and violent. As such, the characters in the story will be exaggeratedly small, or large, or dirty, or clean, or stupid, or brilliant, or civilized, or barbarous - or whatever the author needs to point out, in a larger than life way, the good and bad things about the human race.

Gulliver's Travels is not just an allegory, it is also a *satire* – a story that makes fun of people by presenting exaggerated versions of their real features and behavior. And whom does Jonathan Swift make fun of? He laughs at the people of his own England – and shows how ridiculous their habits are. He ridicules the people of his own European continent – and reveals the ugly side of Europe's wars. Finally, he sneers at the entire human race – calling us ugly, selfish, dirty, and violent.

Let's take a look at three parts of Gulliver's Travels. Each story within the overall story will highlight different features of the human race.

Part One: When the ship Gulliver is traveling on is destroyed in a storm, Gulliver ends up on the island of *Lilliput*, where he awakens to find that he has been captured by Lilliputians, very small people — approximately six inches in height. Now these Lilliputians may be tiny and foreign, but careful reading will show you that they are really a whole lot like the people of Jonathan Swift's own England. They are pathetically weak, ridiculous, selfish, and ineffectively violent.

Gulliver is treated well – but the little people remain always suspicious of this huge friend (and potential enemy). As a favor, Gulliver helps them solve

their problem with their enemy, *Blefuscu*, an island across the bay from them. (These people of Blefuscu bear a strong resemblance to the nation of France – the nation against which Jonathan Swift’s England was at war.) Gulliver wants to help Lilliput, so he singlehandedly takes away the whole naval fleet of Blefuscu, making it impossible for Blefuscu to attack Lilliput.

Gulliver falls from favor, however, because he refuses to support the Emperor's desire to enslave and kill Blefuscuans. In any event, the Lilliputians secretly decide to hurt or kill Gulliver because he will not share their stupid little genocidal plans. In response, Gulliver flees to Blefuscu, where he converts a ship to his own use and sets sail from the world of Blefuscu *and* Lilliput, eventually to be rescued at sea by an English merchant ship and returned to his home in England. So ends the first voyage of Gulliver. And so ends Jonathan Swift’s first satire of England.

Part Two: Gulliver goes again to sea. Travelling as a ship's surgeon, Gulliver and a small crew are sent to find water on an island. Instead they encounter a land of giants. As the crew flees, Gulliver is left behind and captured. (He will later learn that this land is known as *Brobdingnag*.) Gulliver's captor, a farmer, takes him to the farmer's home where Gulliver is treated kindly. The farmer assigns his daughter, *Glumdalclitch*, to be Gulliver's keeper, and she cares for Gulliver with great compassion.

The farmer takes Gulliver on tour across the countryside, displaying him to onlookers. Eventually, the farmer sells Gulliver to the Queen of the giants – a land known as Brobdingnag. At court, Gulliver meets the King, and the two spend many sessions discussing the customs and behaviors of Gulliver's country, England. In many cases, the King is shocked by the selfishness and pettiness of England that he hears Gulliver describe.

One day, on the beach, Gulliver looks longingly at the sea from his box (a kind of a dollhouse). Suddenly, he is snatched up by a gigantic eagle, swept away, and eventually dropped into the sea. A passing ship spots the floating chest and rescues Gulliver, eventually returning him to England and his family. So ends Gulliver’s second journey.

Part Three: Gulliver goes to sea again. While Gulliver is captain of a merchant ship bound for Caribbean Islands, several of his crew become ill and die on the voyage. Gulliver hires several replacement sailors in Barbados. These replacements turn out to be pirates who convince the other crew members to mutiny. As a result, Gulliver is deposited on an island to fend for himself. Almost

immediately, he is discovered by a herd of ugly, despicable human-like creatures who are called, he later learns, *Yahoos*. They attack him by climbing trees and defecating on him.

He is saved from this disgrace by the appearance of a horse who belongs to the race of *Houyhnhnms* – intelligent, civilized horses. The grey horse (a Houyhnhnm) takes Gulliver to his home, where he is introduced to the grey's mare (wife), a colt and a foal (children), and a sorrel nag (the servant). Gulliver also sees that the Yahoos are kept in pens away from the house. It becomes immediately clear that, except for Gulliver's clothing, he and the Yahoos are the same animal. From this point on, Gulliver and his master (the grey) begin a series of discussions about the evolution of Yahoos, about topics, concepts, and behaviors related to the Yahoo society, which Gulliver represents, and about the society of the Houyhnhnms.

Despite his favored treatment in the grey steed's home, the kingdom's Assembly determines that Gulliver is a Yahoo and must either live with the uncivilized Yahoos or return to his own world. With great sadness, Gulliver takes his leave of the Land of the Houyhnhnms.

He builds a canoe and sails to a nearby island where he is eventually found by the crew of a Portuguese ship. The ship's captain returns Gulliver to his family in England. Upon his arrival, he is repelled by humanity – even his “Yahoo” family, so he buys two horses and spends most of his days caring for and conversing with the horses in the stable in order to be as away from what to him is that most unpleasant of animals – human beings.