Settings

The adventures in *Gulliver's Travels* take place between May 4, 1699, and December 5, 1715. Between 1715 and 1720, the fictional main character, Lemuel Gulliver, readjusts to life in England. In 1720, he begins writing an account of his voyages and, in 1727, releases them for publication. The action in the story takes place in England, on the seas, on many strange islands—including one that travels in the air—and in various countries, including ones unknown and uncharted.

Characters

*Lemuel Gulliver* English ship surgeon and accomplished seaman. The main character, he narrates the story of his voyages to strange lands with amazing creatures and sights.

*Lilliputians* Inhabitants of the country of Lilliput. They are no more than six inches tall.

*Emperor and Empress of Lilliput*

*Blefescuans* Inhabitants of the country of Blefescu. In size, they resemble the Lilliputians. When they declare war on Lilliput, Gulliver disarms them.

*Brobdingnagians* Inhabitants of the country of Brobdingnag. They are as tall as church steeples.

*King and Queen of Brobdingnag*

*Giumdalitch* Nine-year-old Brobdingnagian who is small for her age—no more than 40 feet tall. She is a kindly child who cares for Gulliver during his stay in Brobdingnag.

*Laputians* Inhabitants of the flying island of Laputa. They are a race of absent-minded scientists and philosophers who engage in foolhardy projects, such as building a house from the roof down.

*Houyhnhmns* Intelligent horses who rule a land as human do in the outside world.

*Yahoos* Ugly, repulsive animals who resemble humans and are subjugated by the Houyhnhmns.

*Inhabitants of Various Other Strange Lands*

*Sailors From Various Countries*

*Wife and Children of Gulliver*

Themes and Symbols

**Main Theme of the Novel as a Satirical Work**

Serious defects afflict society. Politicians, religious leaders, social planners, military tacticians, educators—indeed, the entire caboodle of society's elite—hamper progress through petty bickering, political machination, aggression, misguided science and art, and out-and-out stupidity. Here are three examples from the novel that symbolize society's shortcomings: (1) The argument between Lilliput and Blefescu over how to break an egg, which represents petty bickering that leads to religious intolerance, war, and other types of conflict. (2) The preoccupation of thinkers at the Academy of Lagado with ridiculous experiments, such as extracting sunbeams from cucumbers and turning human feces into food. The academy represents self-styled thinkers of Swift's day who dabble in foolish, hopeless projects. (3) The Yahoos' animalistic behavior, which represents the behavior of corrupt and vulgar human beings.

**Main Theme of the Novel as an Adventure Story**

Strange and wondrous adventures await people willing to take risks. Gulliver goes to sea again and again—risking the perils of angry weather, pirates, and unfriendly cultures—to escape the familiar and experience the exotic. Such adventures require travel into the far reaches of the outer world or deepest recesses of the inner world of the human mind.
Type of Work

*Gulliver's Travels* is a novel of satire and adventure which has four main sections, called "books," divided into chapters. Preceding the first book is a message from the publisher, Richard Symson. It claims that Lemuel Gulliver is a real person known to Symson. This message is followed by a letter to Symson from Gulliver. Each of these prolegomena, (a formal essay or critical discussion serving to introduce and interpret an extended work), is a fabrication, of course—the work of Swift's mischievous mind—designed to enhance the realistic characteristics of his fictional narrator. Educated adults generally read the book as a satire on current events and social, cultural, religious political trends. Children generally read the book as an adventure story.

Publication of Expurgated and Unexpurgated Editions

The book was published first in 1726 in a shortened edition that deleted passages deemed offensive. A second edition was published in 1735; it contained most, but not all, of the deleted passages. A third edition containing the complete novel was published in 1899.

Tone

Swift writes the first part of his novel with playful satire that casts the half-inch-tall Lilliputians as tolerable bumbling. After all, they are almost endearing in the way that they maintain petty rivalries. For example, some Lilliputians wear high-heeled shoes to make them appear more formidable to their political, low-heeled rivals. However, as Swift proceeds further into his story, his satire darkens until finally—when he describes the repulsive Yahoos, who represent the worst of humanity—he becomes a bit of a pessimist and misanthrope (a person who hates or distrusts humankind). However, Swift always seems to keep in mind the goal of reforming society. Even at the end, when Gulliver loses all hope in humankind, Swift seems to be saying, "This is what will happen to you if you do not change your ways." Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Swift was not a cynic who gave up on society and humankind but instead a man who bit the carcass of the complacent in order to force it to rise and act.

How Measurements Undergird the Plot Structure

Swift uses measurements to unify and support the plot of *Gulliver's Travels*. For example, Books 1 and 2 focus on physical measurements: The Lilliputians are tiny compared to Gulliver, and the Brobdingnagians are gigantic. Books 3 and 4 focus on intellectual measurements: The Laputians are tiny compared to Gulliver, and the Houyhnhmns are gigantic. Thus, the story becomes an adventure in size. Swift also imparts chronological flow to the novel by informing the reader at the beginning and end of each book of the exact date that Gulliver leaves England and the exact date that he returns. In addition, Swift provides detailed statistics on such diverse topics as how many crewmen serve a ship, how many cooks prepare Gulliver's meals, how many citizens inhabit a certain city, how tall or small a person is, and so on.

Swift's Verisimilitude

In a work of fantasy, a writer creates impossible characters, places, and situations and asks the reader to pretend that they are real. To help the reader in this task, the writer tells his tale in such a way that he makes it seem credible—that is, he gives it "verisimilitude." *Verisimilitude* is derived from the Latin words *veritas* (truth) and *similis* (similar). Thus, a literary work with verisimilitude is similar to the truth or has the appearance of truth. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift achieves verisimilitude in several ways:

1. He tells the story in first-person point of view, assuming the persona of Lemuel Gulliver, to present the tale as though it were an eyewitness account. (2) He gives Gulliver a real-world background. (3) He gives imaginary characters, places, and things at least some real-world characteristics. (4) He infuses many passages with statistics.
which—like encyclopedias and almanacs—suggest objectivity and truth. (5) He frequently addresses the reader directly, as if the latter is sitting across the table from him. (In fact, Swift speaks to the reader 48 times during his novel.) This trick helps to make the reader an intimate friend, or confident, of the author. As we all know, a good friend accepts the word of his comrade. (6) He follows each voyage to an unreal world with a voyage back to the real world.

Swift's Ridicule of Travel Writers

Gulliver frequently says he will not “trouble the reader” with detailed descriptions of a particular episode in his travels. Such statements are jibes at travel writers of Swift's day, who tended to inflate their descriptions with an (excess) of insignificant details. The words “I will not trouble the reader” (or similar locutions) occur nine times in the novel to convey the idea that Swift will not trouble the reader with wordiness as travel writers do.

Original Title and Byline

_Gulliver’s Travels_ was originally entitled _Travels Into Remote Nations of the World_. The author was identified as Lemuel Gulliver, not Jonathan Swift. Swift denied himself a byline not only to make the fictional Gulliver appear to be a real person but also to protect himself from the wrath of the people he was satirizing.

Gulliver's Two Personas

Gulliver appears to have two personae, or identities. On the one hand, he is a bystander observing the follies and vices of cultures that symbolize England, sometimes intervening to correct those vices and follies. In Lilliput, for example, he reports on the follies and vices of the Lilliputians and then intervenes to stop a war. On the other hand, he is England itself being observed by outsiders, sometimes promoting vices and follies. For example, in Brobdingnag, he becomes the observed, rather than the observer, and seemingly promotes the use of gunpowder as a way to destroy enemies.

Author Information

Jonathan Swift was born on November 30, 1667, in Dublin, Ireland. His father—an Englishman who had moved to Ireland—died earlier that year. Receiving financial assistance from relatives, Swift attended a good school for his basic education and graduated from Trinity College in Dublin in 1686. He lived off and on in England, became an Anglican clergyman, and eventually was appointed dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, although he had lobbied for a position in England. His writing—especially his satires—made him one of the most prominent citizens in Great Britain, and he worked for a time on behalf of Tory causes. His most famous work is _Gulliver's Travels_, a book of satire on politics and society in general. Swift died in Dublin on October 19, 1745.

"Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own."

Jonathan Swift

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