

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Gulliver's Travels**

by Jonathan Swift

written by Pete Boysen

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# Gulliver's Travels

## Notes

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In reading *Gulliver's Travels*, it helps to understand the historical context in which it was written. From the time Henry VII broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and formed the Church of England, there had been a great deal of political-religious friction in England. By 1688, the situation heated up to the point that James II was forced to abdicate his throne and flee to France. France, being an all-Catholic country, was glad to harbor the Catholic King James and vowed to help in his fight against his Protestant successor, William of Orange. Throughout this period, war between England and France appeared quite likely. Although Swift was an Anglican minister and a strong supporter of the Protestant cause, Swift was also a humanist who was cognizant of the bloodshed and troubles caused by the interminable fighting over religion.

Like the England of today, Swift's England was a limited monarchy with a king, a prime minister and a house of parliament. Unlike today, however, the English king in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had much more power and required a good deal more homage be shown. Sitting in the parliament were members of the two political parties, the Whigs and Tories. In 1710 Swift, who had been a Whig, switched to the Tory party and became an influential political writer and member of the English government. As such, for a time he was familiar with all the politicians and statesmen of his time.

The eighteenth century was called the Age of Reason because the writers of the period applied reason to religion, politics, morality, and social life. These writers saw reason as a tool, a means to authority. Under the microscope of reason, all-important questions were studied from a social and practical point of view. Swift, aware of all these events, devotes a great deal of *Gulliver's Travels* to a consideration of reason: its uses, abuses, and limitations. Swift, in a letter to a friend, says that he rejects Descartes' definition of man as a rational animal. He concludes, "I have always rejected that definition and made another of my own." As you read this book, particularly *Books Three and Four*, see how you think Swift felt about the relationships between man and reason.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press Edition of *Gulliver's Travels*, copyright 2005.

# Gulliver's Travels

## Background Information

JONATHAN SWIFT

Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1667, to English parents and attended Trinity College in Dublin. In 1689, Swift traveled to England to become the private secretary of William Temple. Temple was a wealthy aristocrat, an essayist, and a trusted friend of the king. It was Swift's hope that Temple would aid him in his political ambition. However, this did not happen, and a disappointed Swift returned to Ireland, where he became a minister of a country parish. After a few years, Swift returned to England and served in Temple's employment until Temple's death. It was while Swift was with Temple that he began his writing. After Temple's death, Swift again returned to Ireland to serve as minister in a small parish. In 1710, Swift became a powerful advocate of the new Tory government. In 1713, Queen Anne recognized Swift's skillful support and appointed him dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. It was Swift's hope to be appointed a bishop, but Queen Anne's death in 1714, and the fall of the Tories from office destroyed Swift's hopes. Swift served in the capacity of dean at St. Patrick's, as well as a champion of the Irish cause until his death in 1745.

Swift, Britain's greatest satirist, was a brilliant man who achieved literary fame and high standing in his church, but never felt he had gained what he wanted or deserved. He had a wide circle of friends including Alexander Pope, as well as other leading writers.

In 1726, Swift published his masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*. Children see it as a charming fantasy, yet as a satire it rises to deep moral indignation against the idea that man is animalistic. Swift, whose favorite literary weapon was irony, was a master of clear and simple writing. He once said that the secret of writing good prose is to use proper words in proper places.

## CHARACTERS

The characters in this book are said to be allegorical in that they stand for an idea, an attitude, a picture, or someone else, often specific historical figures. Because Swift's allegories are never black and white, Gulliver stands for different things at different points in the novel. Because Swift's satire is designed to keep the reader independent, the characters are meant to stimulate, not lead.

*Lemuel Gulliver* – is the most important character in the novel. He is sometimes the author's voice. Gulliver is not steady in that he changes in relation to where he is and what has happened to him. He too is a victim of Swift's satire, so the reader must constantly be on guard. As a narrator, Lemuel Gulliver cannot be trusted because his perceptions are sometimes clouded. We meet Gulliver at the end of his fourth voyage. Before he leaves on his journey, Gulliver is intelligent, hard working, disciplined, alert and curious. Because he tends to be a bit "gullible," Gulliver is mistreated during his travels, and these experiences affect him.

# Gulliver's Travels

## Objectives

*By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. define the term satire and point out the manner in which Swift satirizes the following:
  - the English government, including several specific contemporary politicians
  - travel journals of his time
  - scientists of his time and their concept of reason
  - philosophers of his time and their view of man as a rational animal
  - religious differences which separate people and incite violence
2. discuss the rhetorical devices Swift uses in his satire and illustrate any generalizations by citing examples from the book.
3. discuss Lemuel Gulliver's role as narrator of this story, pointing out where he may or may not reflect Swift's point of view.
4. discuss the Houyhnhnms (pronounced Whin-Nims) and the Yahoos; identify the most prominent features of each group, and point out what each group is meant to represent.
5. write an essay answering this question: "What is Swift's view of the nature of man?"
6. define the following terms and relate the terms to this novel:
  - Allegory
  - Misanthrope
  - Allusion
  - Parody
7. contrast the prominent characteristics of the Lilliputian king with those of the Brobdingnagian ruler.
8. identify significant features of the Laputan government and its relationship with Balnibarbi.
9. prove by citing comments or incidents from the novel that Swift attacks pride the most often of all human vices.
10. identify and discuss which satire is tied to a particular place or time in history and which satire is universal and relevant to the reader's world, regardless of time or place.

# Gulliver's Travels

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Define the term allegory and identify in what respect the characters in this book may be said to be allegorical.
2. Some critics say that in *Gulliver's Travels* we see Swift at his most misanthropic; he is a bitter hater of mankind. Other critics say, however, that for Swift the Yahoos do not represent mankind but what mankind must strive to overcome. Offer arguments for both sides and then state your opinion on this issue.
3. Define the term satire and point out in what ways this novel is a satire on the following:
  - the travel journals of Swift's time
  - the British government of his time
  - the scientists of his time and their view of reason
  - religious differences that divide people
4. Gulliver seems to think that in an ideal world men would be rational creatures like the Houyhnhnms. Do you think the rationality of the Houyhnhnms makes for a good place to live, or do you see problems with their lifestyle? How do you suppose Swift would answer this question?
5. Some critics think that at the end of the novel, when Gulliver rejects all human contact because humans are Yahoos, Swift is denouncing humans also. Support or attack that thesis and refer to the text to support your position.
6. Point out at least three incidents in which Swift satirizes "pride."
7. State what satire in this novel is tied to a specific place or time in history and what satire is universal.
8. State how Swift uses verisimilitude to get the reader to accept impossible situations.
9. Contrast Swift's treatment of the Yahoos with his treatment of the Houyhnhnms.
10. Considering the book as a whole, point out both negative and positive pictures of humanity.

**The Publisher to the Reader**

Vocabulary

**antient** – archaic form of ancient, or very old

1. What is the difference between the apparent and the actual purpose of this section?

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**Chapter 8**

Vocabulary

**cabal** – a secret group of conspirators  
**yews** – female sheep

- 1. Having reached the end of Book One, write a statement summing up Gulliver as a character. Use specific examples to support your conclusion.

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- 2. How are the Lilliputians accurate representatives of the human race?

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- 3. Why did Gulliver originally go to sea? What is his new motivation at the end of Part I?

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## Chapter 5

### Vocabulary

**bolus** – the partially digested contents of the stomach  
**cephalick** – related to the head  
**cholick** – digestive discomfort  
**malleability** – the ability to be bent or shaped  
**ordure** – waste products  
**percolate** – trickle down

1. List some of the experiments described in this chapter. What do they have in common?

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2. What is the rhetorical purpose of all the references to feces (“ordure”) in this chapter?

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