

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *Gulliver's Travels*

*by Jonathan Swift*

written by Derek Spencer

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*Gulliver's Travels*

**Note to the Teacher**

*Gulliver's Travels contains several references to bodily functions. Part II, Chapter V contains a short episode in which Gulliver is treated as a sexual plaything, but this episode contains no explicit description or language.*

## Pre-Reading

1. *Gulliver's Travels* is an example of satire, a literary genre in which society's vices, errors, and shortcomings are ridiculed, often through the use of irony. Satire uses humor to cause people to think about serious issues. One common aspect of satirical writing is that the characters often accept as correct and normal the practices that the author is satirizing.

Another technique used in satire is parody. Because *Gulliver's Travels* reads like the "travelers' tales," such as *Robinson Crusoe*, that were popular at the time, you can expect that Swift is parodying aspects of these stories. In these travelers' tales, the characters often find themselves shipwrecked on an island; usually, they meet with a society of native inhabitants.

Based on the definition of satire, can you think of any modern works (television shows, music, movies, books, etc.) that could be considered satire? Do you enjoy them? Why or why not? Write a couple of paragraphs in which you answer these questions. If you cannot think of a modern example of satire, write about your expectations for the novel.

2. *Gulliver's Travels* satirizes many aspects of life in England during the eighteenth century, among them government, politics, and philosophical ideas. The most important ideas presented in *Gulliver's Travels* are still relevant today. Knowing the historical context of the novel will help you to understand and appreciate it more fully.

Research one of the following topics, and write two to three paragraphs summarizing the topic you have selected.

- the Age of Enlightenment
- the conflict between Whigs and Tories in the English government
- the conflict between Catholics and Protestants

### **Introduction: The Publisher to the Reader**

3. This letter, seemingly by Richard Simpson, explains why Gulliver's account of his journeys was edited: in Simpson's opinion, Gulliver wrote far too much about the mundane details of sailing. Simpson claims that the book "would have been at least twice as large" had he not cut out this excess material. However, he also implies that he cut the material *without* Gulliver's permission.

Assume the role of a member of the Nautical Association of Radical Whalers and Honorable Anti-Landlubbers (NARWHAL), a somewhat offbeat organization of sailing enthusiasts. Write the text for a NARWHAL-published pamphlet detailing why the information Mr. Simpson cut from Gulliver's Travels is actually the most important part of the book.

### **Introduction: A LETTER**

4. Gulliver is none too happy that Simpson edited his original manuscript. He claims that Simpson deleted several items, changed the dates of his voyages, and inserted material that Gulliver finds highly objectionable. Gulliver writes that Simpson has made him "say the thing that was not."

A euphemism is a mild word or phrase used in place of an offensive one. For example, a student who failed his or her grade level is said to be "held back." Using the word *failed* may damage the student's sense of self-worth and so is softened by using the phrase "held back." Other examples of common euphemisms include: *downsizing*, which replaces *firing employees*; *correctional facility*, which replaces the word *prison*; and *passed away*, which replaces *died*.

You may have already determined that to "say the thing that was not" is a euphemism for lying. However, does the use of euphemism, in itself, constitute lying? Write a couple of paragraphs in which you answer this question. Then, prepare a short list, containing at least five items, of other euphemisms you can think of. Be sure to include the terms that the euphemisms replace, but take care not to list terms that are inappropriate for the classroom.

## Part I: Chapter I

5. Gulliver is a surgeon by trade; he is the doctor or physician on long sea-voyages. Some of his previous voyages lasted for months, so properly planning for each journey is very important. If Gulliver were to forget an essential piece of equipment, he would not be able to properly take care of the other sailors or treat injuries sustained during the voyage.

Imagine that you are a surgeon. You have just been hired by the captain of a ship and are about to embark on a six-month voyage. Write a list of items you would bring, and briefly explain your reasons for bringing each item. You do not have to restrict yourself to bringing only items that will help you perform your duties as a surgeon, however, keep in mind that space on the ship is limited. The captain may throw overboard any items he deems frivolous!

6. Gulliver describes the natives of the island as "...human creature[s] not six inches high." They tie him down with "strings" and feed him loaves of bread "about the bigness of musket bullets." Gulliver appears to be unafraid of the inhabitants. Remarkably, he displays almost a complete lack of curiosity about them, relating the events of Chapter I in a straightforward, unemotional narrative style.

How might a native of the island relate these events? Rewrite the events of Chapter I from the perspective of a person living on the island. What do you think of the strange creature that has washed up on your shore? How does it look? For that matter, how does it *smell*? How do you feel about the way it is being treated? Why do you think it is here?

## Part I: Chapter II

7. Clearly, the arrival of the *Quinbus Flestrin* (the “Great Man-Mountain”) is a momentous and newsworthy event for the people of the island. Up to this point, Gulliver has not mentioned whether the people have a local newspaper. Pretend that they do, and you are one of the reporters for the newspaper. Write an article detailing the Man-Mountain’s new life as a resident of the island. Be sure to include descriptions of his housing situation and daily habits, using the information Gulliver presents in Chapter II as a guide. Remember, this is a newspaper article, not an editorial. Articles present facts in an unbiased manner, while editorials present opinions and are designed to persuade.

Give your newspaper a name based on what you know about the island, and write a headline that will grab the attention of your readers.

8. Near the end of Chapter II, Gulliver is searched by two officers of the kingdom. The officers, being only one-twelfth Gulliver’s size, cannot understand the purposes of many of the items he has on him. They believe that Gulliver’s pocket watch is either a god or some sort of animal unknown to them.

Select a few items from your own pockets, purse, or backpack. If you have no objects on you, select a few items from your classroom. Attempt to look at them the way a Lilliputian would. Would a Lilliputian understand the purpose of a cell phone by examining it? What about paper money, coins, or a common paperclip?

In the style of the Lilliputian inspectors, write a brief description for each item you have selected. In your descriptions, speculate on the purpose of each item, and, if it may be dangerous, recommend that it be confiscated.