



Gulliver's Travels: To Lilliput and Brobdingnag

Jonathan Swift

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From the Introduction

When Gulliver's Travels was written nearly 300 years ago, European explorers were making maps of all the world. But the Pacific Ocean, where some of the story takes place, was a mystery. Some geographers thought there must be an undiscovered continent somewhere in its lonely reaches. Explorers and sailors who came back from the Pacific wrote vivid tales of their voyages and claimed to have seen strange cultures and fantastic animals, such as unicorns, griffins and giant eagles. Jonathan Swift presented his book's hero, Gulliver, as such a traveler.

But Gulliver's Travels is not only about amazing adventures. It is one of the great examples of satire. Satire is a type of writing that tries to improve people's behavior by showing how it is foolish. Satire tries to make us laugh at our faults and want to change for the better.

Because some people who read the book might think Swift meant to make fun of them, he tried to keep his authorship secret. When he finished writing Gulliver's Travels, he had a coachman drop it at the publisher's front door in the dark of night. It did not have his name on it anywhere. The publisher thought the story was left for him by a ship's doctor named Lemuel Gulliver. Only later did people learn the name of the true author.

Swift surely did have the people and politics of his time in mind as he wrote, but he meant his satire to be about human nature in any time or place. Pettiness, pride and cruelty are faults we can see in ourselves.

Swift said he wanted to shake up readers. He wondered if civilization, for all its clever inventions, might not really be just a more complicated way for people to act like savages. He wanted us to see that we often do not use our ability to reason as we should. But we still have reasoning power, and we can use it to bring our bad behavior under control. Swift was discouraged about human nature, but hopeful for individual people.

Gulliver's name might make you think of the word gullible. As you get to know him, you'll have to decide if you think that is a good description. Gulliver seems certain of many facts. He fills his stories with details that make them seem realistic. But he sometimes seems fuzzy about knowing what is right and wrong. As you read, you should look for times when Gulliver's thinking does not make sense. Swift wanted you to exercise your ability to reason about good and bad, too.

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