

Swift's, Societal Commentary in Gulliver's Travels, Book Iii and Iv

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ABSTRACT

The eighteenth-century English literary scene marked by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the ensuing political turbulence, provides the backdrop for Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels. Swift interrogates the Augustan literary quality and the pragmatic social energies of the age through satirical voyages. Book III, set in Laputa, Balnibarbi and Glubbdubdrib, exposes the pervading non-imaginative, optimistic scientific ethos of the refined period, revealing how excessive intellectualism undermines practical governance and breeds social absurdity. Book IV, the journey to the land of the Houyhnhnms, juxtaposes rational horse society with the degenerate Yahoos, articulating the conflict between reason and primal human vice, thereby critiquing the moral structures of Swift's contemporary milieu. Swift employs these books to dramatise the tension between Enlightenment optimism and the unranked social urges of the era, shaping the development of literary forms that foster better awareness. Scrutinising the multifaceted satire of Swift's Gulliver's Travels, Book III and IV illuminate a distinctive Augustan critique fostering an incisive, nuanced comprehension of socio-political awareness, thereby revealing their enduring influence upon contemporary novelistic techniques and shaping a refined understanding of modern literary satire.

KEYWORDS: Augustan, Laputa, Glubbdubdrib, Houyhnhnms, Enlightenment.

Book III: Voyages to Nowhere

Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, Book 3, presents a scathing critique of the excesses of intellectualism and the disconnect between the theoretical knowledge and practical application. The floating island of Laputa, inhabited by obsessive mathematicians and astronomers, serves as a satirical commentary on the prioritization of abstract knowledge over real-world concerns. As Gulliver notes, the Laputians are "so taken with intense speculations" that they require servants, known as "flappers", to strike their mouths or ears to bring them back to physical awareness, thereby exposing the absurdity of unchecked intellectualism. Swift presents the Laputians as a society consumed by abstract speculation, so-engrossed in intellectual pursuits that they become oblivious to practical reality. The episode showcases Swift's satirical exposure of how an over-indulgence in speculative thought can render a society incapable of attending to mundane necessities, thereby illustrating the peril of intellectual abstract untempered by practical awareness. As Swift notes, "They are very bad reasoners, and most of them are wholly unacquainted with the affairs of the world," exposes the Laputians' intellectual deficiency by

showing their reasoning is fundamentally flawed. Their intellectual pursuits render them poor judges of practical matters, making them ineffective in governing or understanding ordinary human concerns.

Balnibarbi's critique of Laputan Elitism

The Grand Academy of Lagado in Balnibarbie epitomises the dangers of misdirected scholarly pursuit, where whimsical experiments mock genuine scientific endeavor. Swift condemned the insane political scientists, who devise methods to assess taxes relating Balnibarbi politics to English politics and highlighting the dangers of misguided intellectual pursuits. The island of Balnibarbi, positioned beneath the floating dominion of Laputa, presents a stark antithesis to its technologically sophisticated neighbor, revealing the paradox of subjugation to an advanced yet ineffectual regime. Under the oppressive rule of the Laputians, Balnibarbi endures profound economic distress and societal decay, portending how intellectual elitism can precipitate material ruin in subordinate territories.

Laputan Urban Decline

The Capital, Lagado, lies in ruins, its once potential urban fabric reduced to desolation marked by uncultivated fields and an absence of pragmatic innovation. This deterioration exposes the failure of Laputan scientific abstraction to translate into beneficial technological application for its subjects, thereby exacerbating Balnibarbi's stagnation. Consequently, the juxtaposition of Laputa's lofty theoretical pursuits with Balnibarbi's practical devastation critiques the myopic prioritisation of speculative knowledge over tangible socio-economic development.

The academy's project to construct houses beginning at the rooftop and proceeding downward illustrates a deliberate inversion of rational architectural principles, exposing the folly of misguided theoretical speculation. Another ludicrous endeavour seeks the abolition of verbs and nouns, purporting to refine language through eradication of its fundamental constituents, thereby caricaturing linguistic reform devoid of functional sense. These contrived investigations reveal how untempered curiosity can degenerate into intellectual vanity, privileged novelty over substantive contribution to human knowledge. The academy's experiments function as allegorical critiques of scholars who prioritise abstract conjecture above observable reality and practical application. Swift indicts an academic culture that valorizes speculative extravagance at the expense of societal benefit and common sense. Consequently, the Grand Academy serves as a cautionary emblem of how unrestrained theoretical excess can erode the foundations of genuine scientific progress. Ultimately, the institution urges a balanced epistemology that integrates rigorous experimentation with mindful attention to real-world applicability and human welfare.

The Struldbrugs

The Struldbrugs in Gulliver's Travels embody a profound satire on human desire for immortality, as Gulliver's initial perception of them as "the wisest and most fortunate of beings", starkly contrasts with their wretched reality. As Swift writes, "They were the most mortifying sight I ever beheld", exposing the grotesque outcomes of eternal life devoid of vitality. Gulliver's encounter reinforces the idea that "my keen appetite for perpetuity of life was much abated", demonstrating the disenchantment with

immortality's presumed delight. Through the Strulbrugs, Swift challenges the human inclination to romanticize endless life, depicting it as a malediction rather than a boon.

Book IV: The Houyhnhnms-Yahoo Dichotomy

In the fourth voyage of Gulliver's Travels, Gulliver arrives at the land of the Houyhnhnms, where he encounters a society of rational, virtuous horses who embody reason and moral perfection. The Houyhnhnms are juxtaposed with the Yahoos, brutish humanoid creatures representing the baser instincts and irrationality of humanity. Swift employs this contrast as a scathing satire of eighteenth-century British society, critiquing the presumed superiority of humans over other beings and the moral justification of domination. The Houyhnhnms' decision to eradicate the Yahoos serves as a pivotal allegory exposing how humans invoke moral and ethical rationalisations to legitimize their supremacy over other species or social groups. Swift interrogates the ethical foundations of human self-exaltation, suggesting that the veneer of rationality can mask inherent brutality and self-interest.

Gulliver's Disdain for Yahoos

Gulliver's sojourn among the Houyhnhnms leads to a profound disillusionment with humanity, as he internalises their perspective and views Yahoos as embodiments of human depravity, marked by traits like "cunning, malicious, treacherous, and revengeful." The Houyhnhnms' influence on Gulliver is evident in his adoption of their disdain for Yahoos, reflecting a critique of human society through the lens of rational horses, "chiefly from a perverse, restive, disposition". Swift contrasts rational Houyhnhnms and degenerate Yahoos to satirise human pretensions to rationality, with Gulliver's narrative serving as a vehicle for this critique.

Swift employs satire to lambast figures like lawyers and politicians, implicating them in moral decay, as Gulliver notes humans have "no sense of true reason", highlighting the depth of societal corruption. It reflects Gulliver's pessimism regarding human nature, viewing society as flawed, with humans possessing qualities that only "increase our natural vices". The Houyhnhnms serve as a foil, highlighting human shortcomings through comparison, as Gulliver is struck by their rationality versus human, "deformity and diseases, both in body and mind". Gulliver's description of humans as a "lump of deformity", and his experiences lead him to a misanthropic worldview, rejecting human pride as he sees it as unfounded, "smitten with pride, it immediately breaks all of the measures of my patience".

Gulliver's disillusionment with humanity, "instead of reason, we were only possessed of some quality fitted to increase our natural vices", reflects Swift's satirical commentary on human pride and rationality, where Gulliver's self-hatred stems from his identification as a Yahoo, a creature deemed inferior by the Houyhnhnms. The metaphor of a "troubled stream", illustrates how humans' flawed nature is reflected back, distorted and magnified "as the reflection from a troubled stream returns the image of an ill shapen body, not only larger but more distorted". It critiques human exceptionalism, suggesting humans are not the rational creatures they claim to be "we were only possessed of some quality fitted to increase our natural vices", portending the theme of human fallibility, emphasizes the disparity between reason and actual behavior.

Yahoo Society as Dystopia

Yahoo's society was described as a "dystopian" society. Dystopia refers to the totalitarian society where everything is unpleasantly degraded. Yahoos were known to "hate one another more than they did any different species of animals". Their head and breasts were covered with thick hair but the rest of their bodies were bare. They had no tails and often stood on their hind feet. He concludes with "I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable animals". They are "the most filthy, noisome and deformed animals which nature ever produced", and they are "restive and indouble, mischievous and malicious". The detailed bodily depiction emphasises their animalistic, uncivilises nature, contrasting them with with rational beings like the Houyhnhnms. It intensifies the disgust, urging readers to reflect on societal flaws and the consequences of moral decay.

Deconstruction of Reason and Progress

Gulliver's repulsion towards his fellow Yahoos is palpable as he describes their physical and mental deformities, highlighting his internalized self-loathing, "a lump of deformity and diseases, both in body and mind". It illustrates his loss of empathy and patience with humanity, viewing them as grotesque and prideful, suggesting it is unfounded and contradictory to their true nature "how such an animal, and such a vice, could tally together". Gulliver's rejection of his family and fellow Yahoos demonstrates the extent of his disillusionment and self-hatred, emphasizing the disconnect between human's perceived rationality and their actual nature.

Conclusion

Swift employs the allegorical figures of the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos to construct a binary opposition that exposes the contradictions of Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress. The narrative interrogates whether humans, despite their claims to rationality, possess a moral superiority that distinguishes them from other sentient beings. By positioning the rational Houyhnhnms as paragons of virtue and brutish Yahoos as embodiments of human vice, Swift inverts conventional notions of civilization and savagery. It compels the reader to reassess the Enlightenment premise that reason inevitably leads to ethical advancement.

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