

The Altering of Reality in Gulliver's Travels

Gulliver's Travels, written by Jonathan Swift, satirizes the dominant or accepted trains of thought in eighteenth-century England, within the spheres of politics, science, and human rational. In its progression from one register to another, the satire attacks contemporary thought, as it is applied to first particular and concrete ideas or circumstances, and later to general and abstract qualities of human beings. Therefore, it is because of the light-hearted humor created by Swift's perversion of reality that he is able to bring forth arguments that attack the dominance of Whig politics, the obsession of contemporary science, as well as the innate rationality of human beings.

Throughout the first two books of Gulliver's Travels, Swift uses Gulliver to satirize Whig political systems, as well as what he perceives to be the Whig's inflated self-image. In book one Gulliver becomes stranded in the land of Lilliputia, a small island inhabited by tiny humans. Throughout book one Swift uses Gulliver as vehicle for the satire, penning him as a wise giant looking down upon a society lacking of competent leadership and eager to go to war. Book one is best understood by realizing that the Lilliputian society represents the Whig society of England, which Swift detests. In book two, the satirical perspective shifts when in the land of Brobdingnag, Gulliver is miniscule compared to the native inhabitants, and he demonstrates, through his intellectual exchanges with the Brobdingnagians, that he now represents Whig thoughts in a Tory land. The shifts in satirical perspective as well as the language used in books one and two work together to satirize the Whig train of thought.

Swift quickly sets about satirizing what he believes to be the Whig's dominating sense of self-importance. In book one Gulliver refuses to destroy Lilliputia's rival land of Blefusca, an action that infuriates the Lilliputians. Consequently, the Lilliputians decide to bring forth legal action against the giant Gulliver. In doing they draft articles of impeachment against him. Included in these articles is an amusing preamble that describes the emperor as being the,

most Mighty Emperor of Lilliput, Delight and Terror of the Universe, whose Dominions extend five Thousand Blustrugs, (about twelve Miles in Circumference) to the Extremities of the Globe: Monarch of all Monarchs: Taller than the Sons of Men; whose Feet press down to the Center, and whose Head strikes against the Sun. (Swift 25)

The passage is quite humorous because of the blatant exaggeration and misuses of language. For example, the emperor is not so tall that his head touches the sun, in fact he is just a fraction of the size of Gulliver. In addition, the Lilliputians claim that their native island extends throughout the globe, yet Gulliver knows that it is only twelve miles in circumference. And despite the natives decree that their emperor is the terror

of the universe, he is merely a tiny creature, on a tiny island, that Gulliver could easily destroy if he wanted. Before Gulliver's arrival on the island of Lilliputia the inhabitants might have had ample reason to think greatly of themselves. Yet, when Gulliver inhabits the island, the perspective of size and power is completely altered and the grandiose terms the Lilliputians use to describe their emperor cease to fit. And it is from the misuse of language, caused by the shift in perspective that Gulliver's existence creates, coupled with the fact that the satire is aimed at the Whigs, that the humor emerges.

Swift continues to satirize the Whig's false view of themselves in book two. In the land of Brobdingnag the satirical perspective is flipped with Gulliver being developed as a tiny, cowardly Whig dwelling in the Court of a great king who shares Tory thought. The king and Gulliver converse frequently throughout Gulliver's time in Brobdingnag and in one particular instance they discuss a recent incident in which a monkey kidnapped Gulliver. In an attempt to display his bravery after the humiliating event, Gulliver firmly asserts that if he encountered the situation again he would stab the monkey with his knife therefore freeing himself from the animal's grasp. The king's only response to Gulliver's statement is a belittling laugh, which leads Gulliver to reflect on, "how vain an Attempt it is for a man to endeavor doing himself Honour among those who are out of all Degrees of Equality or Comparison with him." (Swift 100). Gulliver, who in book one was himself the brave giant has the situation totally flipped, which forces him to admit that he is inferior to the Brobdignagians. However, the true humor from Gulliver's admission of inferiority comes from the realization that Gulliver is a Whig and the Brobdingnagian's are Tories. Therefore, Swift, through his writing, creates an exchange where the Whigs, who are in power in his native England, admit that they lack the honor of the Tories.

Yet, Swift's satire of the Whig party does not end at lampooning their grandiose opinion of themselves; he also satirizes their political systems. In book two Gulliver and the king once again engage in discussion. This time Gulliver explains, in complete detail, the Whig government of England. A particularly

funny

exchange between the king and Gulliver occurs when Gulliver describes the English House of Parliament, focusing on the House of Commons. Gulliver describes the House of Commons as consisting of freely elected representatives of the people who are chosen "for their great Abilities, and Love of Country, to represent the Wisdom of the whole Nation." (Swift 104). However, the Tory King is quite skeptical of this system and he thoroughly questions Gulliver about the House of Commons, at one point asking Gulliver if "a stranger with a strong Purse might not influence the vulgar Voters to chuse him" (Swift 105). The exchange between the two continues until the king asserts, that although Gulliver claims that "great Abilities, and Love of Country" are the qualities from which a legislator is chosen, he has in fact proven that, "Ignorance, Idleness, and Vice are the proper Ingredients for qualifying a Legislator" (Swift

108). The king and Gulliver's differences of opinion on the subject of the House of Commons is a reflection of the huge philosophical and political gaps that exist between the Whig and Tory parties. Consequently, government, especially the House of Commons, is looked upon from two diverse vantage points that leads the Whigs, represented by Gulliver, to assert that the legislators embody honor and love of country, while the Tories, being represented by the giant King claim the legislators are in fact, ignorant, idle, and full of vice. One cannot help but laugh at the discrepancies of the perceived values of a legislator. Swift's extreme distortion of reality in books one and two, with the Whigs being miniature humans while the Tories are powerful giants, presents an initial humor that slightly masks his blatant lampooning of the Whigs, allowing for the reader to contemplate Swift's points in a comical setting.

In book three Swift continues to distort reality, thereby creating humor, while he satirizes his society's newfound obsession with science and the effect that over-reasoning has on the human mind. At the onset of book three, Gulliver travels to the island of Laputa where he discovers a group of people so obsessed with science and reasoning they can no longer engage in conversation because their minds are filled with questions of science. As a result of this dilemma the nobles of Laputa employ "Flappers", who attend to the nobles and hit them over the head with a bag full of dried peas so that they may free themselves of the scientific speculations taking place in their minds and converse with those around them. This practice of employing flappers is so common in Laputa that when Gulliver communicates to the natives that he has no problem conversing, and is therefore in no need for a flapper's services, the locals look upon him as intellectually lacking because his mind is not lost in concepts of science.

The Laputians are a people particularly enamored with scientific concepts of math. In fact mathematical reasoning dominates the culture to the point that all other ideas, such as beauty, are describe in "Geometrical Terms" (Swift 136). Yet, despite their fascination with the reasoning of mathematics, Gulliver describes the people as being, "very bad Reasoners, and vehemently given to Opposition, unless when they happen to be of the right Opinion, which is seldom their Case. Imagination, Fancy, and Invention, they are wholly Strangers to, nor have any Words in their Language by which those Ideas can be expressed." (Swift 137). As Gulliver explains these people have engaged in too much reasoning and have therefore lost the ability to reason. The Laputian's fascination with the wonders of mathematics could have, at one time, been an example of reasoning capability, but because of their obsession with mathematics they need assistance in engaging in discourse, are especially opposed to discussion of different opinions, and lack imagination and invention. Yet, discussion, opinion, imagination, and invention, which the Laputians are opposed to, are all facets of reasoning.

The contradiction of the idea that reason has led to a loss of reason is, in itself, funny, but the true humor arises from the perspective Gulliver offers on the native Laputians.

They consider themselves to be extremely intelligent people, yet Gulliver, as well as the readers of the satire, view them as morons unable to properly function because they have reasoned too much. Swift's enormous distortion of the scientific community is designed to make the point that because of their intense focus on science, the contemporary science community is losing their reasoning abilities instead of developing them. It is because Swift takes a contemporary situation and perverts its reality to make a point that the reader can consider the point Swift is making while at the same time laughing at it.

But perhaps the most humorous, as well as thought provoking use of satirical situationing derives from Gulliver's exchange with the Houyhnhnms on whether humans are in fact rational. The situation in which the descriptive takes place is already humorous since Gulliver is in the land of the Houyhnhnms, where human beings, referred to as Yahoos, are wild, mindless creatures, while horses, known as Houyhnhnms, are the intellectual masters of the island. The native Houyhnhnms take special interest in Gulliver because, unlike the Yahoos of their native country, he displays civility and reason. Consequently, the Houyhnhnms educate Gulliver in their native language so that he may amuse them at their social gatherings.

Gulliver's education in the Houyhnhnms language enables him and the Houyhnhnms to exchange ideas about their respective societies. After Gulliver discovers that the Houyhnhnms have no concept of government he attempts to explain the English form of government to the Houyhnhnm he refers to as Master. After hearing Gulliver's explanation of government the shocked Houyhnhnm states that, "our (English) Institutions of Government and Law were plainly owing to our gross Defects in Reason, and by consequence, in Virtue; because Reason alone is sufficient to govern a Rational Creature"; (Swift 225). Again, the perspective from which the statement comes must be closely examined. For human beings, government derives from reason, from a collection of shared thoughts that leads men to form a system of rule and create laws that in turn creates a civil system for men to live under. Yet, a horse completely disagrees with this philosophy. He claims that a rational creature would have no need to create a system to live under because reason, combined with virtue, would be sufficient in keeping order. Swift uses the perspective of the Houyhnhnms to question whether government is a derivative of human reason or in fact an example of their lack of reason. In doing so he indirectly questions whether or not humans are rational creatures. This fictional situation in which Horses question whether or not humans are rational beings serves to create humor, through its gross misrepresentation of reality, while at the same time presenting a provocative argument on the same issue

Yet the Houyhnhnms do not end their criticism of human beings' perceived capacity of reason after hearing about government. For Gulliver continues to discuss human reasoning with his master and delves into the idea of natural philosophy. When

Gulliver explains Natural Philosophy, which is a field of study deriving from human reasoning, his master simply laughs at him. Gulliver's master then questions how, "a Creature pretending to Reason, should value itself upon the Knowledge of other Peoples Conjectures, and in Things, where that Knowledge, if it were certain, could be of no Use." (Swift 233). The Houyhnhnm is directly attacking the assertion that philosophy is a direct result of reason. The Houyhnhnm believes that reason results in knowledge, and that a rational creature does not question what it does not know. The Houyhnhnm is further amused by the fact that humans study the questionings of people who do not know, and therefore are lacking of knowledge, and believe it to be an example of their reasoning capabilities. The Horse and the readers, laugh at this exchange because the perspective has shifted and reasoning and philosophy are no longer looked at as related. In fact the word philosophy is twisted to the point that the Houyhnhnm claims that it has no relation to reasoning. Of course the idea that Swift is attempting to introduce, that humans are not rational creatures, would be completely disregarded if not for the fact that the ridiculous shift in perspective, humans being subservient to horses, allows the reader to initially laugh and later ponder his point. And it is because Swift eloquently weaves unrealistic, yet humorous, situations with challenging questions about accepted beliefs that Gulliver's Travels can be read with the ideas presented openly questioned

Satire is a precious art form because it allows authors and readers alike to question beliefs in a comical setting. Because satire distorts actual situations, creating an initial humor, the diverse ideas that then emerge are less threatening than if they were to be introduced in another literary form. In Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift uses satire to perfection by creating absurd situations to challenge Whig politics, contemporary science, and the idea of human reasoning, in a fashion that allows the reader to both laugh and ponder at the same time.

Works Cited

Swift, Jonathan. Gulliver's Travels. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961