Gulliver’s Travels by Jonathan Swift

Precourse Independent Reading

English II/ English II Honors

We are right to think of Swift as a rebel and iconoclast, but except in certain secondary matters, such as his insistence that women should receive the same education as men, he cannot be labeled ‘left’. He is a Tory anarchist, despising authority while disbelieving in liberty, and preserving the aristocratic outlook while seeing clearly that the existing aristocracy is degenerate and contemptible.—George Orwell, Politics vs Literature [1984 and Animal Farm]

Gulliver’s Travels criticizes the time in which Jonathan Swift lived, but more importantly, it criticizes the failings of humanity in every age and country. Like so many books that we call classics Gulliver’s Travels is timeless. We see not only the time in which Jonathan Swift lived, but the ages before and after him; we see, reluctantly, maybe, ourselves and our time.

It is not necessary to know England’s history in order to enjoy this satire, but many of the events in Gulliver’s Travels relate to real events during Swift’s life. Swift was very involved in politics. In its original form, Gulliver’s Travels is high satire and though Swift was often criticizing 18th century England, it can be read without knowing those historical events. This story, like all classics, transcends its time period and is as relevant today as it was in 1726 when it was first published.

Before reading, answer the following questions:

1. What is it mean to be human?
2. What is the relationship between humanity and science and politics?

Swift is attempting to tell us something important—he has his reasons. He is criticizing certain aspects of the culture of his day and humanity in general. It will be up to you to decide if his criticisms are valid and/or still relevant for us today. Begin your precourse reading early in the summer. The reading and packet activities are due when you return to class in August. The work will be collected and assessed. Additional instruction and assessments will continue on this precourse reading, so be certain to bring your book to class.

Email me during the summer for questions about the reading at carteld@bay.k12.fl.us. I look forward to hearing from you.

Mrs. Carter
Stylistic Writing Techniques in *Gulliver’s Travels*

The following are some of the methods Jonathan Swift used to write *Gulliver’s Travels*. **As you read, annotate three (3) examples of each method if you are in English II and five (5) examples if you are in English II Honors, and record them in your dialectical journal.**

**Satire:** Satire is social criticism, but it is really tricky. First readers have to decide what Jonathan Swift is making fun of. Then they have to understand what the author is suggesting as the just and proper way to behave. With Swift, in particular, this is often very hard to judge. The purpose of satire is to change people's minds. Satirists use humor, exaggeration, and ironic juxtaposition to show readers that the way they are accustomed to looking at the world is unreasonable. Good satire, however, doesn't merely criticize; it also shows an ideal against which to measure just how bad current circumstances are.

**Sarcasm, Irony, and Tone:** Sarcasm is one of the main tools of a satirist. Sarcasm is usually meant to criticize a person in some way. Irony is the contrast between what is stated and what is meant. That is why people get mad at sarcasm. But how do people say the very opposite of what they mean and still expect people to understand them? How can you tell if people are being sarcastic? How much of it is tone of voice? (Writing has tone too, but it's not quite as easy to pick up as it is in speech). Tone is the author's attitude toward his subject or theme. Sometimes the content, or situation, itself is so exaggerated that the author couldn't possibly mean what he says. For example, Jonathan Swift suggests in “A Modest Proposal” that one way to eliminate poverty in Ireland would be to sell the infants of the poor to rich people for food. In *Gulliver's Travels*, the narrator calls the King of Brobdingnag ignorant, but Swift expects the reader to understand that the King is wise.

**Ironic Juxtaposition:** This means putting something really important next to something really unimportant and appearing to give them equal weight. When Alexander Pope says, "Not louder shrieks to heaven are cast/ When husbands or when lapdogs breathe their last," he is making fun of women who care more about their little doggies than their husbands. Pope is saying indirectly that reasonable women ought to love their husbands better than their little pets. Swift does this when he has the king of Brobdingnag call Gulliver a "groveling insect" and then shows how terrifying and repulsive insects can be when Gulliver is attacked by flies and wasps. Similarly after describing the laws of the Lilliputians against ingratitude, Swift shows their blind ingratitude to Gulliver for delivering the Blefuscidian fleet to them. Much of the irony in *Gulliver’s Travels* comes from the contrast between self-image and reality: The big and little perspective. Gulliver is constantly full of himself until he is abruptly reminded of his puniness as he falls into a cowpie [poop] or is nearly drowned in a cream pitcher.

One more note: **The narrator of a satire is not the author.** In a satire like *Gulliver’s Travels*, the author pretends to be someone else- a naive traveler to an imaginary or foreign land, or a sophisticated, reasonable man of the world. Gulliver is naive, although he thinks that he is sophisticated. Alert readers see that, at least in Brobdingnag, he is much less wise than the king whom he calls ignorant.
**Gulliver's Travels**

As you are reading, consider the following:

1. What it is that Swift is criticizing and why does he use the methods he does.
2. Notice Gulliver’s character development, as his journey progresses. What kind of man is he in the beginning? What kind of man is he at the end? Why does he change?

As you are reading, answer the following questions in complete sentences. If you are in English II answer your choice of five (5) questions in each Part I, Part II, and Part III. If you are in English II Honors, answer your choice of eight (8) questions in each Part I, Part II, and Part III.

Be certain your responses are supported with information from the text. Answers must be legible. Provide the page number(s) with your answers to cite your source for each response.

**Part I: A Voyage to Lilliput**

1. Why do you think Swift begins his story with so many mundane details about Gulliver's background and in so matter-of-fact tone?

2. Gulliver says of one of the Lilliputians "who seemed to be a Person of Quality, made me a long Speech, whereof I understood not one Syllable." What might Swift be satirizing here?

3. Do you think Swift is criticizing something when the Lilliputians surmise that Gulliver's watch must be the God that he worships? Why or why not?

4. Why do you think Swift has Gulliver say that his Spectacles and telescope would be of "no consequence to the Emperor"?

5. What does the "Dance of the Rope" have to say about politics?

6. What is Swift saying about politics with the colored threads that the Emperor gives to those who impress him the most?

7. What do we learn about the Lilliputians with the knowledge that they believe no other kingdoms exist except those of Lilliput and Blefuscu?

8. What do you think the controversy between the Big-Endians and the Small-Endians represents?

9. The Lilliputians have some very high moral standards. Why is it that they do not seem to be able to live up to these standards? Does the Lilliputian’s physically small size relate to their moral standards?

Part II: A Voyage to Brobdingnag

1. What might Swift be criticizing through the actions of farmer in regard to Gulliver?

2. How would you describe Glumdalclitch's (the girl who takes care of Gulliver) personality?

3. Why is Gulliver declared to be Lusus Naturae (a freak of nature) by the three scholars?

4. Why is the King willing to believe Gulliver's story of who he is when the scholars will not?

5. What kind of persons are the Queen and King?

6. How would you describe Gulliver's description of European culture to the King, and why do you think the King doubts this description?

7. After Gulliver gives a "historical Account" of Europe the King ends his response with one of the most famous passages from Gulliver's Travels:

   But by what I have gathered from your own Relation, and the Answers I have with much pains wringed and extorted from you, I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.

Is the King's evaluation valid? Why or why not?

8. Gulliver dismisses the King's evaluation of his country in the following paragraph:

   But, great Allowances should be given to a King who lives wholly secluded from the rest of the World, and must therefore be altogether unacquainted with the Manners and Customs that most prevail in other Nations: The want of which Knowledge will ever produce many Prejudices, and a certain Narrowness of Thinking, from which we and the politer Countries of Europe are wholly exempted. And it would be hard, indeed, if so remote a Prince's Notions of Virtue and Vice were to be offered as a standard for all Mankind.

What is Gulliver saying about the King? What do you think Swift is saying about Europe?

9. The King says:

   . . . that whoever could make two Ears of Corn, or two blades of Grass to grow upon a Spot of Ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of Mankind, and do more essential Service to his Country than the whole Race of Politicians put together.

What is Swift saying about politicians in this passage?
Part III: Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms

1. Why do you think the Laputians only concern themselves with Mathematics and Music?

2. How does the absence of "Imagination, Fancy, and Invention" contribute to the kind of people the Laputians are?

3. Gulliver has the honor to "lick the Dust before his [the King's] footstool." What does this episode tell us about Swift's thoughts on Kings?

4. How would you describe the Struldbruggs?

5. Why does Gulliver change his mind about wanting immortality?

6. Why is Gulliver so horrified to see "a perfect human Figure" in that of a Yahoo?

7. Why does Gulliver work so hard not to be associated with the Yahoos?

8. Gulliver's Master says this about speech:
   That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now, if any one said the thing which was not, these Ends were defeated, because I cannot properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving information, that he leaves me worse than in Ignorance; for I am led to believe a Thing black, when it is White, and Short, when it is Long.
   What does this mean?

9. Gulliver gives the reasons for war. What are the main reasons nations go to war according to Gulliver? Choose one word that best describes why nations go to war, according to Gulliver, what would it be?

10. Gulliver says that the society of lawyers has a language all its own. What advantage is gained by any group of people who have a language than cannot be understood by outsiders?

11. Explain what Gulliver means by "the Rich Man enjoyed the Fruit of the Poor Man's Labour."

12. Why does Gulliver begin to view humanity differently? Do you think Gulliver is overreacting? Why or why not?

13. Gulliver says he will sacrifice all for the sake of "Truth." Is this wise? Why or why not?

14. What do you think about Gulliver's changed view of his homeland, his family and humanity? Is he right to come to the conclusions he has?

15. Gulliver says, "... my principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse thee." If we take this as Swift, telling us as readers what his intent was, of what have we been informed?

16. Is humanity as bad as Gulliver thinks it is at the end of the novel?

Historical Connection

Read and annotate this article from ‘Patriot Dean’. Note connections between Jonathan’s personal and political ideals and those found in his satire *Gulliver’s Travels*. Write a 250-300 word essay in which you discuss how he might feel about the politics and religion of 18th century England.

Jonathan Swift as the ‘Patriot Dean’

When Jonathan Swift died 250 years ago, his publisher George Faulkner eulogised him as ‘a great and eminent Patriot’, whose ‘Genius, Works, Learning and Charity’ evoked universal admiration (Dublin Journal 19-22 October 1745). The sequence of Faulkner’s phrasing deserves notice, since even as Swift’s ‘Genius, Works [and] Learning’, represented by *A Tale of a Tub*, a host of irreverent verse and, especially, *Gulliver’s Travels*, had gained him an international reputation as a satirist on a par with the ancients, his patriotic efforts had earned him still greater respect and affection from the Irish people. Advocating economic self-sufficiency in his Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufactures (1720), promoting self-respect and political autonomy in the face of the London government’s imperiousness with *The Drapier’s Letters* (1724-25), exposing the scandalous condition of the Irish poor in his *Short View of the State of Ireland* (1728), and bequeathing most of his fortune to found Ireland’s first mental hospital, Swift had certainly become ‘The Hibernian Patriot’—the title used by Faulkner on his 1725 edition of *The Drapier’s Letters*. Swift’s popularity as an author has continued undiminished in the centuries since, and literary critics (not always joined by moralists) have consistently maintained his eminence. Yet in Ireland, after his death and for nearly 200 years, Swift’s patriotism came under severe and diverse questioning. Only in recent times, in fact, has he become accepted as a patriot without serious challenge.

Anomalous patriot

For Swift was an anomalous patriot, a figure of contradictions. Native to Dublin, educated at Kilkenny College and Trinity, he considered himself not Irish but an ‘Englishman born in Ireland’. The attitude so implied was in many ways typical of those of planter stock—it included a general indifference or hostility to the culture and language of the Gaelic Catholic majority—but Swift’s personal orientation to England was uncommonly strong. His parents were English, he lived and worked in England for years as a young man and, as an adviser and propagandist for Queen Anne’s Tory ministers, again in middle age. He cultivated there the friendships he most valued, sought there a permanent position, and regarded the one he received in Ireland instead as tantamount to exile. In religion Swift was not simply a Protestant, and thus a member of a minority in Ireland privileged over the Catholic majority, but a prominent clergyman of the Church of Ireland, stalwart in promoting its rights and privileges as the established church against the interests of an only slightly smaller Presbyterian community. Presbyterianism, in fact, he despised, while also never disputing the Penal Laws that curbed the civil and religious rights of
Catholics. Hence, though generally considered an ancestor of Irish nationalism for his resistance to British encroachments upon Irish rights, his Ireland was a Protestant kingdom and mainly an Anglican polity.

In practical terms, moreover, except for his campaign as the Drapier against the London government’s imposition of Wood’s halfpence upon Ireland, his patriotic writings were ineffectual in gaining their stated purpose. He proposed Irish self-sufficiency, deplored the absenteeism of landlords and suggested improvements in agriculture and social conditions, but his arguments were unavailing with the Irish governing class. Despite his efforts, the economic position of the Church of Ireland eroded slightly in his day, and some restrictions upon Presbyterians were eased. A statute of the London parliament in 1720 declared Ireland a depending kingdom, clarifying the subordinate status of the Irish to the English parliament defined by Poynings’s Law in the fifteenth century; though as the Drapier Swift voiced Irish resentment against the arrogance of imposing Wood’s coinage as an effect of that subordination, his victory was limited to the withdrawal of Wood’s patent. The subordination of Ireland continued. It was in fact Swift’s stance as a patriot, more than the success or even the substance of his arguments, that drew political admiration for him in his lifetime. The patriotic effect of his Irish Manufactures pamphlet in 1720, for instance, issued less from what it promoted than from the government prosecution it provoked. In the hope of flushing out its anonymous author, its printer was taken to court, though Swift was widely known to have written it, the reward posted for revealing its authorship went unclaimed, and the jury refused to find printer or pamphlet seditious. The attempt at censorship failed, then, but the cause of self-sufficiency was not forwarded.

Acclaim among the common people

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In life, Swift’s stance as a patriot combined with such humanitarian activities as giving to beggars or lending without interest to poor tradesmen, to gain him unusual acclaim among the common people. After his death this reputation was continued and elaborated in folk memory, in jocular, often apocryphal reminiscences and stories that even found their way into Gaelic folklore. But even by then the political nation whose cause he served in The Drapier’s Letters was occupied with different, fresher issues, more immediately relevant than those of his time. In addition, the popular biography of Swift by his sometime friend, Lord Orrery, published in 1752, argued that the Dean’s patriotism was hypocritical: Irish affairs simply provided Swift with a means of irritating or embarrassing the Whig government in London that had displaced his Tory friends when Queen Anne died, and dashed his hopes of a career in England. Irish patriotic hypocrisy seemed of a piece with the misanthropy that Orrery, confirming the suspicions of some contemporary English critics, saw as the basis for literary satires like A Tale of a Tub and Gulliver’s Travels, and with the scatology in these and in Swift’s poems. Swift became an author more popular than respectable, and admired rather for ironic wit than moral guidance well into the nineteenth century; and among Irish politicians and commentators he became rather a figure of abstract, superficial reverence than a source of patriotic inspiration. Even Henry Grattan’s famous invocation of Swift when haileding the dawn of Irish legislative independence in 1782—‘Spirit of Swift, spirit of Molyneux, your Genius has prevailed; Ireland is now a nation’—was not, we now know, actually spoken in 1782 but added to an edition of Grattan’s speeches that appeared after his death in 1820. Underlying the specific difficulties that the Irish political nation had in perceiving the dimensions and potential of Swift’s patriotism in the eighteenth century was a subtle and problematic shift in their own
self-perception. At the time of Swift’s birth in 1667, there was a recognisable colonial identity among Protestants, particularly Anglicans, in Ireland, forged from a sense of English political and religious pride or affirmation refined by its contrast to the characteristics of the Irish Catholic majority. Their anti-Catholicism, that is, was exacerbated by the proximity, numbers and rebelliousness of the Catholic Irish, features that English recusants generally lacked. Thus colonial fears about the ‘wild Irish’ whose land they had settled were magnified enormously by the Irish rebellion that began in 1641. The massacres of that year assumed mythological significance as their numbers were exaggerated to reach into the hundreds of thousands, confirming the indigenous Catholic Irish as barbarous and bloodthirsty, and privileging the Protestant colonial remnant as divinely spared to advance and prosper by suppressing the natives. That the Catholic Irish remained intent on exterminating Protestants, in political if not physical terms, was further confirmed by the brief empowerment of Catholics in the Jacobite regime a generation later. Protestants were not massacred, but their hold on the land (and thereby on legislative power) was threatened by the Patriot Parliament’s challenges to property titles. Henceforth, once Irish Jacobites were defeated or exiled, the penal laws were intended to turn the tables decisively by impeding Catholic land ownership and church freedom. So deprived progressively of political-military or pastoral leadership, the Catholic masses, whatever their numbers, would pose no more threat to the reinstated Irish colonial regime than the peasantry did to governments anywhere in pre-democratic Europe. The demise of that threat enabled the emergence of an Irish political nation exclusively Protestant and predominantly Anglican, which began in the eighteenth century to develop a sense of itself as a distinct kingdom with economic interests occasionally diverging from England.