

Saying "the thing
which was not":
consciously
constructed confusion
in gulliver's...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ But the chief end I propose to my self in all my labors is to vex the world”

Jonathan Swift In most ironic works there are two voices. Ellen Winner and

Howard Gardner explain that in irony, “ what the speaker says is

intentionally at odds with the way the speaker knows the world to be” (428).

The use of the word ‘speaker’ twice in this sentence reveals a great deal

about irony. One of the speakers that Winner and Gardner refer to is the

actual voice speaking to the audience in the work. The other voice is usually

the authors’, and lurks behind the immediate text or voice, with a view

counter to that of the first voice. In Jonathan Swift’s short ironic work, “ A

Modest Proposal” there are two such voices at work. One voice is the naïve

voice set in the text, a voice that recommends the slaughtering of children

for social good. The other, contrasting, voice is Swift’s own mature voice

which sits behind the text and uses the naïve speaker to demonstrate the

absurdity of the naïve speaker’s own point. In Swift’s work, Gulliver’s Travels,

he makes it clear that he will use multiple voices before the work even

begins. Swift inserted a letter supposedly written by Lemuel Gulliver, the

narrator of the Travels, as a preface to the work. In this light passage the

reader is made aware that a voice other than the author’s will be used. The

difference in meaning between the two voices is not known at this point, but

in the rest of the work the contrast of these multiple voices is vital to the

elucidation of the Swift’s aim. In Gulliver’s Travels, as in other ironic works,

there is a naïve first voice in the text, a voice that is, for the most part,

manifested in Gulliver. But in book four the irony takes some odd turns that

do away with the standard two-voice system of irony, such as that one seen

in “ A Modest Proposal”. There are a number of creatures presented, each

with a drastically different style of living. The standard by which these

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

creatures are judged shifts over the duration of the work, creating multiple voices of judgement. In Gulliver's Travels it is clear that there is more than one voice, but it is unclear with which of the multiple voices Swift's sentiments lies, and thereby the stable opinion by which these creatures are being measured. This confusion forces the reader to examine the work for a stable voice. One possible stable solution for the mature ironic voice is Gulliver himself, as he is at the end of the book. At the beginning of book four Gulliver has just been thrown off of his ship, and has found himself in the land of Houyhnhnms-kind creatures that resemble horses but possess the ability to speak and reason. Gulliver is taken care of by a Houyhnhnm master who is eager to learn of Gulliver's land. At the beginning of book four, there is a blatant naivete and even absurdity to everything that Gulliver tells the Houyhnhnm master. When describing the many causes of war to the Houyhnhnm master, Gulliver explains that, Sometimes the Quarrel between two Princes is to decide which of them shall dispossess a Third of his Dominions, where neither of them pretend to any Right. Sometimes one Prince quarreleth with another, for fear the other should quarrel with him. Sometimes a War is entered upon, because the Enemy is too strong, and sometimes because he is too weak. Sometimes our Neighbors want the Things which we have, or have the Things which we want; and we both fight, till they take ours or give us theirs. It is very justifiable Cause of War to invade a Country after the People have been wasted by Famine, destroyed by Pestilence, or embroiled by Factions amongst themselves. (184-5) And so the short monologue continues, with the extremism and one-sidedness of the views ever escalating. Gulliver, though, never makes any reference to this one-sidedness. His ignorance of the weight of his words in the early part

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

of book four marks him as a naïve conduit through which these harsh views can pass. Gulliver's ignorance is underscored by his vocalized desire to give a completely unbiased account of man. Before delivering the harsh views above he tells the Houyhnhnm master, " I shall here set down the Substance of what passed between us concerning my own Country, reducing it into Order as well as I can, without Regard to Time of other Circumstances, while I strictly adhere to Truth" (184). This contradiction between tone and desire marks Gulliver as ignorant of his position. The one-sidedness that Gulliver does not recognize in his own words seems to be the mature voice of irony, Swift's own voice. If this is the case, Swift believes the horribly one-sided view of man that Gulliver is unknowingly delivering to be true. Gulliver's naivete is an oblique voice through which Swift may deliver this scathing truth. This form of delivery seems reasonable because of Swift's disposition. As his autobiography tells us, " Swift was no fiery revolutionary" (Hunting 24), thereby assuring us that if Swift did possess these views of man, he would not want to angrily deliver them in a fiery diatribe. In addition, Swift would have known that no one would listen to the charges of a screaming extremist. By shielding his views in irony ~~the~~ the naivete of Gulliver- Swift, it seems, finds an effective way to somewhat softly deliver his harsh views. Such a harsh view of man would not be unusual for the time. Thomas Hobbes, a prominent philosopher who immediately preceded Swift, articulated similar beliefs. Hobbes, in his work *Leviathan*, describes the cause of war among men. He argues that, " We find three principall causes of quarell. First, competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory" (185). This view is quite similar to the view that Swift, in the guise of Gulliver, delivered.

Hobbes goes on to say that, " Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two
<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

Cardinall vertues. Justice, and Injustice are none of the Faculties either of the Body, nor Mind" (188). For Hobbes, the only thing that provokes peace among men is their fear of death. In Gulliver's Travels there are characters remarkably similar to this Hobbesian conception of man: the Yahoos are human-like creatures, but have no redeeming characteristics. Hobbes' conclusion is that men naturally live in a " brutish manner" (187), remarkably similar to the Yahoos. As book IV progresses, however, Gulliver comes to see the perfection of the utopian Houyhnhnm society, and by contrasting this perfection with the version of humanity that he has been presenting, loses his naïve view of man. Among the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver objectively tells us, " Friendship and Benevolence are the two principal virtues among the Houyhnhnms" (202). These positive traits are all governed by reason. There is no possibility of grand evils like war, and lying, and killing in Houyhnhnm society. Not even petty strife such as " Wranglings, Disputes, and Positiveness in false or dubious Propositions" exist (202). At the same time that he sees the virtues of the Houyhnhnms' system Gulliver realizes the evil of man—the Hobbesian or Yahoo view of man; that view that it could be argued Swift has had since the beginning. As Gulliver's naivete disappears, and he comes to see man as Yahoo, it seems that the irony in the work also disappears; Gulliver adopts the previously established mature voice and climbs out of the naivete of the first voice: " When I thought of my family, my Friends, my Countrymen, or human Race in general, I considered them as they really were, Yahoos in Shape and Disposition" (211). When Gulliver is forced by the Houyhnhnms to leave the their community and rejoin humans, including his wife and children, he complains that he would rather live on a solitary island than be with humans. Finally convinced that <https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

no such island exists, he resignedly mumbles, " I complied at last, finding I could not do better" (220). This maturation and subsequent loss of irony is not surprising because it comes at the end of the fourth book of this four-book work. It seems reasonable that Gulliver would finally realize what he has been ignorant of (and hence what Swift has been cognizant of) throughout the work, thereby allowing for some closure to the work. In exchange for the irony, in these closing pages we find a character that seems to be Swift's moral lesson for us all. Swift seems to saying that we should all face up to the truth that we are Hobbesian creatures, as Gulliver did. In light of this perception of the story Gulliver's desire for isolation upon returning home seems at first reasonable and even respectable. As John Gay relates to Swift, the Duchess Dowager of Marlborough proudly said " that if she knew Gulliver, tho' he had been the worst enemy she ever had, she would give up all her present acquaintance for his friendship' (qtd. in Correspondence 183). In proudly displaying her sympathy for Gulliver the Duchess showed her own belief that her sympathy for Gulliver was also sympathy for a Swift who shared Gulliver's Hobbesian view of man. And it is not only unscholarly Duchesses who hold this view. William Thackeray and George Orwell may not sympathize with the Duchess' desire to embrace Gulliver, but they did agree with her interpretation of the tale. Thackeray argues that Swift, " began to write his dreadful allegory *Gulliver's Travels* of which the meaning is that man is utterly wicked, desperate, and imbecile, and his passions are so monstrous, and his boasted powers so mean, that he is and deserves to be the slave of brutes" (37). Orwell expresses a similar interpretation in " Politics vs Literature"; " We are to be told that the Yahoos are human beings Swift has overreached himself in his fury, and is

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

shouting at his fellow creatures: "You are filthier than you are!" (255). But while Gulliver was shouting at his fellow creatures, Swift was doing nothing of the kind. Orwell, Thackeray, and the Duchess are all misguided in their interpretation that Swift agrees with Gulliver's belief that men are Hobbesian creatures. Swift does not believe that Gulliver's willingness to completely forsake humanity is a just measure of humanity's worth because he does not believe that humans are the Hobbesian characters that Gulliver comes to believe they are. Swift remarked before the writing of *Gulliver's Travels*, "I tell you after all that I do not hate Mankind" (Correspondence 118). The duchess, who thought she had found the mature voice of Swift, actually represents, herself, the naïve voice of this ironic story. Swift, himself, meticulously exposes the instability, and contradictory nature of Gulliver's new Hobbesian belief. When Gulliver returns to society he is firmly entrenched in his view that man is Yahoo. His first reaction to the Portuguese sailors that are to save him is "betwixt Fear and Hatred . . . When they began to talk, I thought I never heard or saw any thing so unnatural; for it appeared to me as monstrous as if a Dog or a Cow should speak in England, or a Yahoo in Houyhnhnms-Land" (217). But while Gulliver expresses nothing but contempt, the Portuguese sailors show nothing but benevolence and kindness, just that which the Houyhnhnms hold in highest esteem. Gulliver tells us that in their first words, after a brief questioning of Gulliver, "They spoke to me with great Humanity, and said they were sure their Captain would carry me gratis to Lisbon" (217). When Gulliver meets the captain he is forced to admit "he was a very courteous and generous Person," even though Gulliver was "ready to faint at the very Smell of him and his Men" (218). Upon arrival in Lisbon this Captain offers Gulliver whatever he desires.

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

“ The Captain persuaded me to accept a Suit of Cloaths newly made,” (219) and also supplied Gulliver with food, and lodgings. In addition to all this material generosity the captain kindly and calmly accepts Gulliver’s absurd hatred of man, and places him in the furthest room in his house from the street. In the end the Captain gently forces Gulliver to return to his home and wife. Upon leaving, the Captain “ lent me Twenty Pounds. He took kind Leave of me, and embraced me at parting; which I bore as well as I could” (220). This last scene of the Captain warmly hugging Gulliver, while Gulliver shivers in disgust at the benevolence and kindness, captures the absurd distance that Gulliver holds himself from the kind people around him. It is strikingly apparent that this Portuguese Captain possesses no visible evil. The prudent reader finds himself annoyed at Gulliver’s dogmatic refusal to see in this man just those traits that the Houyhnhnms glorified. Through this striking contrast Swift represents just how offensive and extreme Gulliver’s new Hobbesian view of man is. By making Gulliver’s view look absurd in this way, Swift makes his own view on the issue perfectly clear: he denounces the truth of this Hobbesian view of man as Yahoo that he seemed to so strongly convey through Gulliver. Swift also makes Gulliver’s views look unjust by having him use superficial and unreasonable criteria to judge humans; criterion like their smell. When Gulliver’s wife welcomes him home Gulliver says, “ having not been used to the Touch of that odious Animal for so many Years, I fell in a Swoon for almost an Hour. . . . the very Smell of them was intolerable” (220). The Houyhnhnm master had accused humans of being like Yahoo’s in many ways, but the one point on which he commended humans was on their cleanliness. The master had said that Gulliver “ must be a perfect Yahoo; but that I differed very much from the

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

rest of my Species, in the Whiteness and the Smoothness of my Skin, my want of Hair on several Parts on my Body," (178) while later in the work the Houyhnhnm master complains sympathetically to Gulliver of the Yahoos and their "their strange Disposition to Nastiness and Dirt; whereas there appears to be a natural Love of Cleanliness in all other Animals" (198). Gulliver, therefore, finds in humans the one attribute that the Houyhnhnm master did not criticize man for. By constructing Gulliver to hate man only through this completely absurd claim, Swift emphasizes the absurdity of Gulliver's Hobbesian hatred of man. Sometimes making this turn of viewpoint involves Swift in some strained writing. For the sake of irony Swift wants to keep alive the belief that Gulliver hatred of humans is reasonable, but at the same time Swift needs this narrator, who supposedly hates humans, to convey the positive aspects of humanity that Swift knows exists in these and all men. The text shows this strain in such lines as this one describing what the Portuguese Captain provided Gulliver: " At last I desired to eat out of my own Canoo; but he ordered me a Chicken and some excellent Wine, and then directed that I should be put to Bed in a very clean Cabbin" (218). Gulliver's complimentary description of each thing he was given is in sharp contrast to Gulliver's feeling that the Captain forced each of these luxuries upon Gulliver. Placing these contrasting descriptions directly adjacent to each other undermines Gulliver as a credible thinker on these points, and allows Swift to pull off this tough turn. By using strained sentences such as this one Swift is able to pull the turn off, but these points of strain are beacons that reveal the turn that Swift is making. But Gulliver left the Houyhnhnm land with two new beliefs. The first is his new Hobbesian view of man as Yahoo, of which Swift exposes the fallacy. His second belief, however, is a

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

corresponding reverence for the Houyhnhnms' life of reason. While Swift may not agree with the Hobbesian view of man, he could still believe in the Houyhnhnms' system of life. And indeed, this hypothesis is supported by many aspects of Swift's portrayal of the Houyhnhnms. The Houyhnhnms have a system in which evil is completely absent. "As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by Nature with a general Disposition to all Virtues, and have no Conceptions or Ideas of what is evil in a rational Creature; so their grand Maxim is, to cultivate Reason, and to be wholly governed by it" (202). This cultivation of reason leads the Houyhnhnms to hold friendship and benevolence as the two principal virtues. Holding reason in such high esteem and as natural, was, again, not unusual for Swift's time. Swift would have found support for this view in the Deist philosophers of the day. The Deists believed that some larger force controls everything, a force that ensures that everything is for the best. The exaggerated deist, Pangloss, in Voltaire's *Candide*, succinctly summarizes this philosophy: "It is demonstrated that things cannot be otherwise: for since everything was made for a purpose, everything is necessarily for the best purpose" (18). This sentiment is exactly mirrored by the master Houyhnhnm who says that it is impossible to imagine that "Nature, who worketh all things to Perfection, should suffer any Pains to breed in our Bodies" (190). Swift could easily have created the Houyhnhnms in all their perfection to demonstrate his own belief in the deist philosophy. Orwell believes that he has done this: "As his ideal being he chooses the horse" (43). But, while man is not the evil that the Hobbesian would have us believe, Swift does not believe that man should emulate the Houyhnhnms. If Orwell had done a bit of homework, he would have seen that his view contradicts Swift's own beliefs. Swift

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

according to John Robertson's "especially detested the Deists, with their reliance on reason" (Cooper 45). Accordingly Swift exposes the deficiencies of the Houyhnhnms, as he did with Gulliver's deficiencies. In chapter nine the Houyhnhnm master has just returned from the Houyhnhnms' congress, and tells Gulliver of the meeting. He recounts that, "The Question to be debated was, Whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth" (205). One side of the debate argued that the Yahoos should be exterminated, while the other side held that the Houyhnhnms should merely attempt to control the Yahoos. This whole event stands in direct contradiction to Gulliver's remark that, "It was with extreme Difficulty that I could bring my Master to understand the Meaning of the Word Opinion, or how a Point could be disputable; because Reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain" (202). Gulliver had earlier said that the Houyhnhnms did not have opinions or debate, but this episode shows them in discourse that can be called nothing but debate. The Houyhnhnm master did preface his explanation of the debate between the Houyhnhnms by saying that, while this debate was an old debate, it was also the only one that had ever occurred. But if they had had this debate many times before, then the Houyhnhnm master would have surely known what debate and opinion was when he made his point to Gulliver. These two descriptions of the Houyhnhnms stand in direct contradiction, and are a hint that the optimism of the Houyhnhnms' system is unwarranted. But it is no surprise that this is the only point ever to be debated among the Houyhnhnms since the Houyhnhnms conscientiously avoid any situation that could engender any opinion, or emotion. There is no possibility for love between two grown Houyhnhnms because mates are carefully chosen based on hair coloration, <https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

and disposition (203). (Swift showed his particular disdain for such a view in his journal, when he said “ no wise Man ever married from the Dictates of Reason” (Thoughts 285)). Nor does love exist between a grown Houyhnhnms and a young Houyhnhnms. As Gulliver observes, “ They have no Fondness for their Colts or Foles; but the Care they take in educating them proceedeth entirely from the Dictates of Reason” (202). The Houyhnhnms are able to cut contention out of their society only by completely avoiding any situation that could possibly be contentious or engender feeling. Swift, himself, mocks this scheme in an essay: “ the stoical scheme of supplying our wants by lopping off our desires is like cutting off our feet, when we want shoes” (Scott 277). This is just what the Houyhnhnms do. They negate the possibility of any contentious issues by negating part of a full life ~~by~~ by fencing their lives into a narrow area where contention will not occur. The Houyhnhnms are also exposed in chapter nine for their lack of benevolence. The Houyhnhnms are most proud of their benevolence, and yet, in all their august reason, they never seem to have pondered the meaning of benevolence. Is benevolence merely not harming those who do not harm you? If so, then the Houyhnhnms can make a claim to benevolence, as they peacefully coexist with all creatures but the Yahoos. However, the definition of benevolence must include some aspect of ruling others. The Houyhnhnms seem to have been given the task of ruling, or at least watching over the Yahoos. This task gives the Houyhnhnms their one opportunity to display their benevolence. What do they do with this opportunity? They debate whether they should exterminate their subjects. This scene does not fit well with Gulliver’s remark that the Houyhnhnms are “ endowed by Nature with a general Disposition to all Virtues, and have no Conceptions or Ideas of what is evil in a rational

<https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

Creature." Swift sets up the Houyhnhnms so that the only areas to which they can make a claim to virtue are those areas where virtue is the path of least resistance. Swift then creates a few situations in which the Houyhnhnms would not have such an easy time maintaining their virtue. With each of these situations the flaws and deficiencies of the Houyhnhnms' system show. In fact, chapter nine, where all of this exposition occurred is, from the viewpoint of plot, completely gratuitous. At no other point does Swift depart from the narrative of Gulliver and his conversations with the Houyhnhnm master. The inclusion of this chapter can only be seen as a sign that Swift was using it for his moral ends. And so both of these strong possibilities for the mature ironic voice are disposed of by Swift. Both views that Swift rejected were extreme views: the Hobbesian view was a belief in the pure evil of man, while the Deistic view was a belief in the pure virtue of reason. Such a rejection of extremism fits with the description that Samuel Johnson, Swift's contemporary gave of Swift. He remembered that Swift "pays no court to the passions; he excites neither surprise nor admiration" (66). But this is only his temperament, not his view of man. On man Swift wrote to Thomas Sheridan that "You should think and deal with every Man as a Villain, without calling him so, or flying from him, or valuing him less. This is an old true lesson" (Correspondence 94). In this quote Swift seems to be saying that man is not the good that the Deists envision. But he says, this does not mean that we should turn away from man because of his vices, as Gulliver did when possessed with the Hobbesian belief. In hindsight the writing in Gulliver's Travels is in accordance with the view that he affirmed to Sheridan, yet this view is not affirmed in the Travels, it is only seen in the rejection of counter views. Swift did not use a medium that was suited for <https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

the affirmation of such a view. In fact irony is not designed for the affirmation of any view. As Winner and Gardner explain, in irony “ the speaker conveys a negative attitude toward something by professing to have a positive attitude” (429). The resultant ‘negative attitude’ is conveyed by the mature voice of irony towards the naive voice. As is apparent from this explanation irony’s intent is the conveyance of a negative attitude towards something—not an affirmation of something. Swift knew this, and used irony because his intent was not the affirmation of any idea. The affirmative idea he expressed in his letter to Sheridan makes sense in terms of Gulliver’s Travels, but this message is not apparent in the Travels. What is apparent in the Travels is Swift’s continual creation and then destruction of believable hypothesis. Swift does away with each possibility by first building it to be as strong as possible before carefully dismantling it by exposing the contradictions and hypocrisy inherent in each view. Surprisingly, just this intent can be seen as Swift’s conclusive mature ironic voice. In a letter to Alexander Pope, Swift forewarned that in Gulliver’s Travels “ the chief end I propose to myself in all my labors is to vex the world” (Correspondence 102). In the very process that it took to reach this conclusion, it is quite apparent that Swift was successful in his attempt. References Cited Cooper, Anthony Ashley. Characteristics of Men, Opinions, Times, ed. John Robertson. (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1964). The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift Volume 3, ed. Harold Williams. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963). Hobbes, Thomas. Leviathan, ed. C. B. Macpherson. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968). Hunting, Robert. Jonathan Swift. (New York: Twayne, 1967). Johnson, Samuel. Lives of the English Poets. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905). Monk, Samuel Holt. “ The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver,” Sewanee Review. 63 (1955) p48-71. Orwell, <https://assignbuster.com/saying-the-thing-which-was-not-consciously-constructed-confusion-in-gullivers-travels/>

George. " Politics vs. Literature" [1946] in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters Volume 2*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1970). Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. (New York: Dover, 1996). Temple, Sir William. *Five Miscellaneous Essays*, ed. Samuel Holt Monk. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963). Thackeray, William. *Gulliver's Travels: English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853). *Thoughts on Various Subjects, in Prose Works*, ed. Temple Scott. (London: Bell, 1897-1908). Voltaire. *Candide*, trans. Lowell Bair. (New York: Bantam, 1959). Winner, Ellen and Howard Gardner. in *Metaphor and Thought 2nd Edition*, ed. Andrew Ortony. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993).