

Search for family in gulliver's travels

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The Fatal Final Journey

We all have a crazy family member. Whether it's your mother, little brother, or Aunt Karen, they can always be counted on to make a scene at Christmas dinner. In almost all cultures, family is a core value we are taught to respect and love, even when you want to wring their neck. It often feels like family is inescapable; "you can choose your friends but you can't choose your family." Or at least, that is what people are led to believe. Yet in his novel *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift uses Gulliver's relationship both with his family and the people he discovers (primarily the Houyhnhnms) to demonstrate that family is not a concrete idea an individual is born into, but rather can be discovered for oneself.

Gulliver's relationship with his wife may not be one of equals due to the time period, but it does progress from one of mutual respect to total disregard on his behalf. In the beginning of their relationship, Gulliver's business as a doctor began to fail. An opportunity arose for him to become a ship's surgeon, but before making a decision, he "therefore consulted my Wife, and some of my Acquaintance, I determined to go again to Sea" (22).

Gulliver understood that this would impact all of his new family, and made sure that this was a mutual agreement because he respected his wife's position. However, after two voyages that caused him to be at home for only two months of a total seven years, his wife was no longer open to the idea. When Gulliver proposed another voyage, his "Wife protested I should never go to Sea any more; although my evil Destiny so ordered that she had not Power to hinder me" (139). He justifies his actions by claiming that it is his "

destiny” which has set him upon this course of neglect. Not 10 days later, he began planning his next sea voyage against his wife’s wishes. Gulliver said, “the only Difficulty that remained was to persuade my Wife”, removing all doubt that he was unaware of just how afflicted she was (144). Within the next month, he was finally able to convince her, saying “consent however I at last obtained by the prospect of Advantage proposed to her Children” (144). This statement demonstrates two points: that Gulliver addresses the children as hers—showing no interest in claiming them himself as family—and that the proposed “advantage” is in fact his absence. Gulliver believes that her children will be better off without him.

Out of all the cultures Gulliver visits in his travels, he relates most deeply with the Houyhnhnms, a community of intelligent horses living on a secluded island. On this island, the horses are dominant over the Yahoos, a primitive race of humans. Over the course of 5 years Gulliver learns about the Houyhnhnms’ society, and has a particular interest in their family practices. He explains that these horses have a strong sense of comradery, demonstrated by his observation that “a Stranger from the remotest Part is equally treated with the nearest Neighbour” (246). Interestingly, despite this communal bond, the Houyhnhnms do not invest in one another emotionally. They have “no Fondness for their Colts or Foals” and breed specifically based on attributes (246). This Houyhnhnm belief parallels directly with Gulliver’s reaction to his children and his wife. It would seem that he no longer has any compassion towards any of his family, disappearing with the slightest blow of the wind. Gulliver says specifically, “Nature teaches them to love the whole Species, and it is Reason only that maketh a Distinction of

Persons, where there is a superior Degree of Virtue” (246). Gulliver has reasoned that his weak Yahoo family back in England is of no benefit to him or society, and cast them aside in his pursuit of emulating the Houyhnhnms. Unfortunately for him, the Houyhnhnms have decided the same. At the convening of their grand council, the horses concluded that it was inappropriate for Gulliver to continue residing in their community, and that he must return to his own country. He utters that in comparison, “ Death would have been too great an Happiness” (257). This man learns that he will be sent home to his wife and children, and only responds with a yearning for death. To Gulliver, he is being expelled from the only family he has known.

The clearest insight into Gulliver’s relationship with his family occurs on his return from living with the Houyhnhnms. Upon his return , he is says that “ My Wife and Family received me with great Surprise and Joy, because they concluded me certainly dead; but I must freely confess the sight of them only filled me with Hatred, Disgust, and Contempt” (265). These are extremely polarized reactions; yet it is crucial to note that Gulliver is not numb to his family. Unlike his precious Houyhnhnms, Gulliver continues to harbor emotional attachment to his family. Most troubling is his delusion that he remains above the “ Yahoos” (his family) when in reality he is reacting in a much more primal manner: negatively. He quickly realizes that “ by copulating with one of the Yahoo Species I had become a Parent of more, it struck me with the utmost Shame, Confusion, and Horror” (265). Gulliver’s abhorrence of the “ Yahoos” living under his roof does not fade, and he explains that after five years of being home he is still unable to sit in the same room as them. His solution to this is to “ buy to young Stone-Horses,

which I kept in a good Stable” (266). After 16 years of voyages to supposedly provide for his family, he chooses to invest his money in the care and maintenance of creatures of the same breed which ousted him from the community he so adored. They are his closest and only friends, of whom Gulliver says “ understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four Hours every Day” (266). He attempts to continue to live his life as a Houyhnhnm in every regard, but is continuously crippled by his intolerance his family. Most certainly, they feel as though Gulliver never returned from that fatal final journey.

Some critics may object to Swift encouraging his character to broaden his familial horizons out of concern for Gulliver’s actual family. In reality, his family had become accustomed to his absence and was thriving despite of it. When returning from Brobdingnag (being gone for four years), Gulliver says of his wife, “ I found she had starved herself and her Daughter to nothing” (139). Clearly in this case Gulliver’s family was hemorrhaging; however this was only halfway through his period of adventure. When he leaves again, and then returns 5 years later the scene is much different. His family has prospered, and Gulliver “ found my Wife and Family in good Health” (201). This is not to say that his family was unwelcoming, but they were habituated with his escapades, creating a separate life for themselves.

Jonathan Swift uses the relationships with the people circling Gulliver’s life to demonstrate his hungry search for family. Although Gulliver does not get acceptance into his chosen preference, the Houyhnhnms, he is able to start a smaller group when he returns home through the purchase of two horses.

These creatures occupy most of his time, and he remains unable to interact with his blood family without experiencing intense disgust. While Gulliver may not be experiencing the “happily ever after” he desperately sought, his story is one that must be recognized as a journey; a journey in more than discovery of new worlds, but the discovery of one’s family.