

Gulliver describes the sublime american system to the king of brobdignag

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This essay is modeled on chapter six from Part Two of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels. In this chapter, Gulliver describes the mechanics of the British government in a satirically earnest manner to the King of Brobdignag. This essay differs from the novel in that the subject is not the British government of the 1700s, but the modern American educational system. " Nothing but an extreme desire to maintain veracity could have kept me from relating this episode. I am quite sorry that it occurred in the first place, but the king of Brobdignag was so very curious as to our educational customs that I found it impossible to remain silent on the subject; unfortunately, this resulted in a great deal of ridicule and slander of our school system. I do feel, however, that some allowances must be made for the king who, having lived his entire life in such an isolated country, possesses an extraordinarily narrow frame of mind.

After I had been in captivity for some time, the king became curious as to my native customs, asking most particularly about our system of educating the young. Pleased to do the king a service, I launched into a description of our educational chain of command. At the top, I explained, is the superintendent of schools, whose job is to determine when the weather presents sufficient hazard to the life and limb of students to cancel school for the day. Under the superintendent are the principals, one for each school. Their duties include the bolstering of the logging industry by the writing of a great many official bits of paper, and addressing the student body on such vital matters as the bans on hats, public displays of affection, and leaving the school grounds for lunch.

The vice-principal, who works just under him, is charged with distributing the bits of paper among students, teachers, and other administrators, as well as making announcements regarding the rescheduling of detentions, dismissal of rumors, and commands to attend the latest tailgate. Other administrators include the dean, who administers detentions; the counselors, who prevent students from taking their first-choice courses; and the secretaries, who aid the vice-principal in the distribution of official documents. Although they control almost everything that happens in a school, these administrators do not have much to do with the education of students. That task falls to the teachers, who are required by law to indoctrinate students with various facts, figures, and concepts, using a variety of methods. I then moved from a description of the job structure to an outline of the actual operation of the schools. I explained to the king that, as a student ages, he or she moves upward through a system of grades.

This process begins when a child reaches the age of five or six. These kindergarteners, as they are called, must often be pried, weeping, from their parents, in order to be herded into a classroom and made to repeat their ABCs and 123s for two or three hours. After this, the children are made to lie down and take naps on small mats, where they are presided over by adults, ready to shush them if they should make the slightest twitch. This practice serves the double purpose of stimulating development of the children's brains and giving the teachers a rest. After their nap, the children are permitted to return home for the remainder of the day.

This routine is repeated daily for about nine months, beginning at the end of August and finishing at the beginning of June. In the fall, the cycle begins again, and the children become “ first-graders” in an “ elementary school.” Their routine changes with this upward move. In elementary school, naps are not permitted during class, which lasts from nine in the morning to two-thirty in the afternoon. In addition, the children progress from the alphabet to reading, writing, mathematics, and the history of the Pilgrims. This admirable situation continues for five years.

The fall after the completion of fifth grade, the children attend classes as sixth-graders in a “ middle school.” Here, the routine changes once again. The children have multiple teachers and “ lockers” in which to keep their possessions during the school day, which lasts from eight in the morning to two-thirty in the afternoon. They remain in middle school for three grades; during this time, the children learn more advanced mathematics, earth science, and, most importantly, social skills such as rumor-mongering, backstabbing, and the switching of loyalties. When they become ninth-graders, the now-adolescents move once more, this time to a “ high school.” The four years or “ grades” of high school are quite distinct from one another.

The lowest grade is ninth or “ freshman.” The second is tenth or “ sophomore,” the third, eleventh or “ junior,” and the highest, twelfth or “ senior.” In high school, the routine differs from that of the middle school years. Classes begin at seven-thirty in the morning and end at two in the afternoon. Although it is not uncommon for a student’s workload to double or

even triple during these years, social skills remain a major part of the high school experience as the students prepare for adult life. These skills include navigating the cafeteria, attending dances and sporting events, being part of a team, and introductory romantic relationships.

Some qualities, I continued, are common to all schools, particularly that of homework receiving a grade from a teacher. These grades depend on the quality of the student's work and, in certain subjects, on the caprice of the teacher. The best work gets an " A" grade, the mediocre work a " B," the bad work a " C," the dreadful work a " D," and the abysmal work an " F."

However, I continued, grades are but a small part of the vast and wonderful school system. Surpassing even grades in importance are sports.

The most popular sport, what we call " football," is not dissimilar to the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, in which two teams of males in tight clothes are made to chase each other around a field, the winning team being the one that inflicts the greatest bodily harm on the other. The only unpopular sports in America, I explained, are those which do not involve drawing blood or breaking bones. Those who do not care for sports are deemed deviant and subjected to remedial treatment, consisting mainly of public humiliation. The next topic that I outlined for the king is the mechanics of coursework at the high school level. High school students take six or seven classes per year.

Basic requirements include English, Math, Science, and Social Studies, with lesser requirements in Foreign Languages, Music or Visual Arts, and Physical Education. These courses are taught using a wide variety of methods. It is

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common in English courses to find such things as “ video response sheets,” “ words of the week,” and “ reading-comprehension checks.” These instruments of teaching ensure that students acquire the abilities to spout nonsense on command, relearn redundant information, and comprehend such elements of literature as who the main character is, where the story is set, and the gist of the plot. In Mathematics, the teaching usually involves copious and repetitious tests, homework, and “ pop quizzes,” all of which serve the admirable purpose of developing a student’s ability to function under extreme stresses, such as trying to solve fifty problems in one class period.

Teaching methods in the Sciences often involve turning students loose in a laboratory with several types of chemicals and a Bunsen burner, which encourages benign experimentation such as the setting off of small explosions. This method also develops a student’s social skills by challenging them to function in a group setting with their eyebrows singed off. In Social Studies, the teacher normally provides the students with a fifty-fifty mix of historically important dates and personal anecdotes. This mix ensures that most students will fail their history tests but gain great facility in appearing to listen while, in reality, texting or taking a nap. In the Foreign Languages, teachers often repeat several simple phrases continually for an entire year.

Students subjected to this method learn to say “ hello,” “ goodbye,” and “ how are you?” with great proficiency. Music and the Visual Arts, those detestable cultivators of creativity, are taught at a bare minimum, and are, I am happy to say, the first classes to be cut when a school needs extra

money to cover the cost of all those official bits of paper or football uniforms ripped in the heat of battle. The final requirement, Physical Education, is normally taught by having several groups of students run around an enclosed space while fighting to retain control of a ball. This practice increases the physical well-being of the students but is, paradoxically, also one of the first programs to be cut when a school needs money. Fortunately, these cuts in physical activity, by some mysterious process unknown to science, are purported to decrease the number of overweight and obese students. The king, rendered largely speechless by this display of magnificence, asked faintly how the students reacted to these methods of teaching, and if it were possible for any child to avoid entering this system in the first place.

Somewhat taken aback by his unenthusiastic tone, I replied that many students seemed sadly unappreciative of the wonderful institution of which they were a part. Indeed, I continued, many professed a strong desire to (here I lowered my voice so that the queen, who was standing nearby, would not hear the abomination) leave school altogether! As to the king's second question, I said that it was indeed possible, although state legislators and school officials often strove to make the exemption of a child from compulsory attendance as difficult as they could. This practice of exemption from compulsory attendance, known as "homeschooling," was happily not, as I explained, a common one in my country. The deranged parents of these unfortunate children actually believe (and here I lowered my voice again) that the best way for a child to learn is through exploration and creativity! I asked the king if he had ever before heard of such an awful delusion. He

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seemed, sad to say, too overcome (doubtless by the horror of the idea) to speak a word! A few days later, after the king had had sufficient time to look through his notes, he called me before him once again to pose some regrettably ignorant and narrow-minded questions. He first asked, whether it might not be a better use of time and energy to make official papers concerning only those matters of truly vital importance.

He then wished to know why it was so vital to ban hats, kissing, and outside lunches, when doubtless there were much more serious problems to be dealt with, such as harassment, academic integrity, and the like. He also questioned the necessity of such things as detentions, football, and mandatory naps. I was so shocked at these dreadful insinuations that I found myself quite unable to speak. Nonetheless, the king continued, asking whether it would not be better to group students by academic ability instead of age. This was such a grievous blow to my sensibilities that I fell down upon the table, and had to be revived with smelling-salts. The king then professed his shock at the idea that creativity was discouraged, and asked whether it might not be better to make that the focus of education.

He then proceeded to rail in a most unseemly manner that we were pounding all that was good and useful out of our children, causing them to become petty, bloodthirsty, and mindless conformists. He then declared that he believed homeschooling, in which children explore topics at their own pace and according to their own interests, in order to cultivate depth of thinking, to be the far better philosophy. At this monstrous statement, I flew into a rage and did not recover for over an hour. When I had recovered from

my fit of fury, I realized that I could not suffer myself to stay one moment longer in that country of closed-minded idiots, and so promptly climbed down from the table on which I stood. Creeping along the flagstones, I made my way to my bedroom door which, by a happy accident, had been left open. I slipped out of the palace and through the streets of town, taking great care not to fall into the cracks between the paving stones.

After several hours of this tiresome crawling, I found myself at the seaside on the edge of town. Walking along the beach in search of some twigs with which to build a raft, I happened upon a battered rowboat, half-buried in the sand. Eagerly, I used my hands to uncover it and found it to be in good condition, with the oars tucked in under the prow. As soon as the tide was high enough, I pushed the boat down to the water and climbed inside. After a day and a night at sea, during which time I was sorely in want of food and water, I was spotted by a Portugese freighter. The good captain agreed to give me passage to America, in exchange for my services as a surgeon for the remainder of his voyage.

Thus did I, Lemuel Gulliver, effect an escape from Brobdignag, that country of intolerable cretins.”