

Lilliputianism, past and present

Business



Each cumbersome step lifted me about six inches nearer my destination. Laden with provisions, weary, and drained, uphill trudged I to the top. My glistening face, stitched sides, slipped feet, and diminished faith betrayed my doubt about the worthiness of my cause.

At last- after battling fatigue and demoralization, I had arrived at the Atlantic Coast Conference equivalent of the summit of Mount Everest: the nosebleed section of the Dean Dome at the UNC vs. Duke basketball game. Crawling into my seat, which the kindly but furtive figure at the bus stop assured me offered a panoramic view, I realized why my highly sought-after ticket was the only one left. An orange backdrop illuminated tiny blue specks, which I could only assume to be basketball players, of lilliputian size from this wide angle. Later in the game, I discovered a silver lining to my predicament: since my thumb massively outsized any of the men, I could quite easily crush those I did not like- namely, the Puke (I mean, Duke) competitors.

Quite possibly, my experience paralleled that of Dr. Lemuel Gulliver of Jonathan Swift's satire, *Gulliver's Travels*. Both of us, after an imperiled journey (I, to the nosebleed section of a basketball arena, and he, to an island after a shipwreck) at last arrived only to encounter smaller-than-life figures. However, the similarities end here. Whereas the basketball players only seemed lilliputian from my perspective about three stories above the court, Gulliver encountered actual Lilliputs, the group from which the term lilliputian originated.

Lilliputians were small in body, in mind, and in spirit. Gulliver, the giant invader of the miniature island, finds himself surrounded by creatures

standing about six inches tall. These creatures, the Lilliputs, exploit Dr. Lemuel's hugeness to defeat their enemies the Blefuscus, who also max out at half a foot tall. The Lilliputs refuse to listen to Gulliver's advice on foreign policy and eventually expel him even though he won a great victory for them, exhibiting their small-mindedness.

From the court of the Lilliputians readers can also glean the miniscule nature of the country. High officials receive appointments based on theatrical talent instead of merit, and the members of the court spend much of their time arguing and scheming against each other. All of these examples from Gulliver's Travels exhibit the diminutive character of the Lilliputs and disclose a broader meaning of the term lilliputian. This concept also can be found outside of literature. An example of lilliputian mentality in real life occurs during World War II when Japan refused to surrender to the Allies, even after explicit warnings of danger.

"Lilliputianism" also reveals itself during the 1960s when the white leaders of our country remained stubborn and narrow-minded regarding racial equality in the United States. A closer look into the etymology of the term lilliputian offers a deeper layer of understanding to its meaning. Lilliputian cannot be defined only as small or tiny, as in the miniscule size of a baby mouse. Petty and trivial, although acceptable, do not encompass the full meaning of lilliputian. Rather, lilliputian means lacking in confidence, limited in perspective, and little in character, in addition to size.

The genius of Swift's Gulliver's Travels lies in how it simultaneously characterizes the physical description and mental portrayal of a population

that is petite in every way. Perhaps the basketball players seemed lilliputian from the 1, 052 row up above courtside. However, the young men (in light blue, at least) on the court embody a disposition and strength of character quite unlike the Lilliputs that Gulliver believes exist in every human. It is only when Dr. Lemuel himself becomes a miniature to the Brobdingnagians that he begins to question his own- and our- society.