

Book four of swift's
gulliver's travels:
satirical, utopian, or
both?



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Once kick the world, and the world and you will live together at a reasonably good understanding. Jonathan Swift

When *Gulliver's Travels* was first published in 1726, Swift instantly became history's most famous misanthrope. Thackeray was not alone in his outrage when he denounced it as "past all sense of manliness and shame; filthy in word, filthy in thought, furious, raging, obscene" (quoted in Hogan, 1979: 648). Since then, few literary works have been so dissected, discussed and disagreed upon. It is the magnum opus of one of the English language's greatest satirists, but certainly does not offer any easy answers. It is written like the typical travel book of the day, but instead of offering a relaxing escape from the real world, it brings us face to face with reality in all its complexity. Of the four books comprising the work, by far the most controversial has been the last: "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms". In it, the narrator, Gulliver, is deposited by mutineers on an island inhabited by two species. The Yahoos are dirty, savage and barbaric, with no capacity for reason. These wretched creatures physically resemble humans but immediately fill Gulliver with loathing. The Houyhnhnms, on the other hand, are a race of talking horses governed completely by reason. They lead natural, simple lives, and use the Yahoos for menial labour. They are so honest they cannot conceive of the notion of dishonesty. They regard Gulliver as a precocious Yahoo and, after a few years, banish him from the Island. Gulliver is heartbroken, having developed a love for these serene creatures and their way of life. He spends the rest of his life in England, trying talk to horses and regarding his fellow humans "only with Hatred, Disgust and Contempt". Until the 20th century, criticism of book four tended to equate Gulliver with Swift. Gulliver would rather jump from the ship that "rescued" him than re-enter human society He cannot

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bear to look at his own reflection because of the resemblance he bears to the Yahoos. He sees himself as unworthy even to kiss the hoof of his Houyhnhnm master. This deeply offended an England which regarded man as the apex of creation and the paradigm of reason. Swift seemed to be damning mankind to a useless, horrible existence, without the prospect of any self-improvement or progress. Modern criticism, however, can be divided into two broad schools of thought concerning the extent Swift wished to present the Houyhnhnm society as ideal. James L. Clifford distinguishes between a 'soft' and a 'hard' approach (Lock, 1999). The approach one takes has a bearing on one's entire notion of the book: on the narrative technique, on the genre, and, most importantly, on the target of Swift's satire. The soft approach, currently the more popular of the two, defends Swift from his 18th century detractors by refuting the idea of Swift as a people-hater. Exponents believe that there is a clear distinction between Gulliver and Swift, and that Swift is satirising his narrator rather than speaking through him. The Houyhnhnms are ironic devices not meant to be taken as ideal. Similarly, the reader is not to despise the Yahoos as Gulliver does, because the Yahoos, too, are abstractions. Gulliver's behaviour at the end is so absurd and silly that all the "insight" he has gained cannot be taken seriously. He regards the kind Captain Mendez as just another Yahoo, thus he is clearly unreliable, say the critics. Furthermore, the Houyhnhnm society is, by modern standards, far from ideal. Houyhnhnms love all members of their race equally, yet feel no romantic or sexual love. As supremely rational creatures, they see it as folly to mourn the death of a particular family member or friend. They reject anything that they are not familiar with. They exploit the Yahoos and procreate according to strict eugenic principles so as to breed an inferior

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servant class. Their language is limited and their culture primitive. They come across as remote, cold and dreary. George Orwell takes particular exception to the Houyhnhnms, calling them walking corpses. He sees their society as the epitome of totalitarianism, where the attitude is "we know everything already, so why should dissident opinions be tolerated?" (Orwell, 1971: 353). Surely this could not have been Swift's idea of an ideal society, says the soft school. The Houyhnhnms must be symbols for man's rational element, and the Yahoos symbols for man's appetitive, sensual qualities. Swift hated deistic rationalism, popular in the 18th century, which relied on reason as the only guide for belief and action. Thus Gulliver is satirised for failing to find a balance between his humanity and his intellect. Crane sums up the imputed moral: "human nature is bad enough, but it is not altogether hopeless; reason is a good thing, but a life of pure reason is no desirable end for man". This critical approach tends to see Gulliver's Travels as a novel. Gulliver is a psychologically complex character and Swift uses him as a dramatic device. This paper wishes to reject the easy compromises of this approach in favour of the traditional, 'hard' school of thought. Gulliver's Travels is a satire, and Gulliver as satirical device does not have a fully-fledged personality. Although it is dangerous to equate narrator with author completely, Gulliver and Swift share the same basic view of human nature. The difference, as R. Crane says, is simply "between a person who has just discovered a deeply disturbing truth about man and is considerably upset and one who has known this truth all along and can therefore write of his hero's discovery calmly and with humour". There are no indications anywhere that Swift did not himself believe the words he puts into his hero's mouth. Readers have no other source but Gulliver, no contradicting views

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between which to decide. The ending of the book is not comical, but poignant. Gulliver, once so self-assured and proud of his species, has undergone a tragic disillusionment which cleverly forms the climax of the entire work. The view that Gulliver's Travels does in fact despair of the human condition ties in with what is known of the author. His declaration that " Principally [he] hate[s] and detest[s] that animal called man" (quoted in Columbia, 1993) is certainly unequivocal enough. Swift was an orthodox Christian and a conservative. His puritanical views caused him to regard man as " fallen", as inherently sinful and evil. The Houyhnhnms represent prelapsarian existence. Unlike them, Adam and Eve were not content to live in blissful ignorance and brought about man's wretched state by following their appetites rather than their reason. Similarly, Gulliver's curiosity and thirst for adventure is the cause of all his troubles and of his cruelty to those he leaves behind. He was certainly no democrat; he hated lords and politicians but felt no better about the lower classes. To claim Swift could not have sanctioned the exploitation of the Yahoos or lower caste of Houyhnhnms is to assume that Swift had modern values such as freedom and equality. These values resemble meliorism, which argued for the possibility of progress and improvement of society and which Swift dismissed even in his own day. We also know, from another work, the Battle of the Books and from book three's Voyage to Glubdubbdrub that Swift had great respect for Classical Man. Although the Ancient Greeks and Romans were still human, they were as noble, uncorrupted and sensible as man could get. The Houyhnhnm society reminds of the Classical society in its simplicity. It corresponds particularly well with Plato's description of his ideal state in the Republic. In the Republic, everyone knows their place and duties in society.

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Inferiors do not strive to be equal to their superiors, and superiors do not ill-treat their inferiors. Children are educated only in mythology and physical fitness. The rulers have no private property or families, having given their children to the "community" at birth. Plato felt that only a few people possessed the capacity to reason properly, but that this capacity was the most valuable. He also distrusted the written medium, which he regarded as imperfect and misleading. It seems as if Swift had Plato specifically in mind when creating the Houyhnhnms. Plato did not believe that his ideal society would ever come into existence, and Swift probably believed so even less. But unlike the soft school, which says that a life of reason is unattainable and undesirable, Swift believed that it is only unattainable. Whether Swift portrays the Houyhnhnm society as perfect for humans is an almost superfluous question, as it will never come about. Rather, it is a foil for human society, a device to show that we are not as rational as we think. Swift, in a letter to Pope, says that Gulliver's Travels aims at "proving the falsity of that definition *animale rationale*; and to show that it should be only *rationis capax*" (quoted in Hogan, 1979: 648). By this he means that man has the capacity for a smattering of reason, but that instead of using it to uplift himself, he uses it to increase his depravity. The singularly human phenomenon of war, for instance, so ridiculous when explained by Gulliver, requires some intelligence on the part of humans but not much. Gulliver's sleeping quarters are literally halfway between the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms, and this becomes a metaphor for man's paradoxical state. Swift includes sympathetic characters like Captain Mendez in the book to drive home the point that he is referring to all humans, including the reader who may imagine himself exempted. Perhaps this is the reason why readers

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are so eager to soften the message of Gulliver's Travels because they want to deflect the harsh glare of his satire away from themselves. This is certainly why the work has become a popular children's story. The idea that we are all Yahoos for life alarms people as much today as it did almost three centuries ago. Then there are the numerous references to excrement, which becomes a symbol for man's filthiness. When the Yahoos first see Gulliver, they defecate on his head, whereas Swift's ideal being, the horse, has particularly inoffensive dung and lives cleanly. This ties in with the contrast between the Yahoo diet and the Houyhnhnm diet. Gulliver cannot live on the monotonous but healthy diet of the Houyhnhnms, and this is further proof of barbarism. However, Swift does, ultimately, give us a glimmer of hope for humanity. After all, this is the Irish patriot who pronounced Ireland "the most miserable country upon earth". Although he is passionate in his hatred for humankind, he is almost equally passionate in his love for it. True, this is no gentle humanist who sees the world basking in a rosy glow. Yet no-one who really does not care for his own species is so angry at finding it deficient. If Swift were really an all-out misanthrope, he would not have seen the point of trying to make humanity aware of its condition. He would not have given two thirds of his earnings to the poor. In his own forceful way, Swift dedicated his life to improving society. He knew he could not make Houyhnhnms of humans, but at least he could hold up his famous mirror of satire to show his fellow Yahoos what they really are.

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