

The duality of book four of gulliver's travels



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During the early 18th century, an explosion of satire swept through British literature. This period, often called the “ Age of Reason,” was highly influenced by a group of the elite of society, who called themselves the Augustans and were determined to live their lives according to “ truth” and “ reason.” Likewise, they often found themselves the object of a good deal of satire. Among the satirists of this age were such distinguished authors as Daniel Defoe, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift. Of the three, the most biting, most pungent, and most bitter writing came from Swift. Swift, unafraid to attack almost every institution, often found himself surrounded by controversy. His most contentious and his greatest work, however, was a series of chronicled voyages known as Gulliver’s Travels. Through the adventures of Lemuel Gulliver, Swift ridiculed everything from English politics to human nature. Indeed, Swift said that the purpose of his Travels was to “ wonderfully mend the world” (qtd. in Rowe 143). All four books of Gulliver’s Travels are utterly filled with satire, which, simply put, is a type of writing that derides the frailties and vices of a person, an institution, or society in general. “ The satirist holds up for his readers to see a distorted image, and the reader is to be shocked into a realization that the image is his own” (Dyson 673). The fourth book of Gulliver’s Travels, “ A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms,” is particularly filled with satire, as Gulliver discovers a Utopian society of horses (Houyhnhnms) who sneer at humans (Yahoos) as being savage. Throughout the selection, Swift also includes irony in his work to aid him in his satire. Verbal irony (the kind that Swift uses) occurs when an author says one thing, but means something entirely different. Although Swift’s primary goal in writing the Fourth Voyage of Gulliver’s Travels was to point out the savagery of human nature, a closer reading reveals a more

subtle, ironic caricature of the Augustans. There can be little doubt that the major purpose of the Fourth Voyage is to reveal the barbarism of humanity. The theme is found nearly everywhere. The reader cannot help but feel in part ashamed of himself after finishing the book. As Gulliver first descends upon the island, he meets a disgusting group of humanlike animals known as Yahoos. Moreover, when he first sees them, he says: " Upon the whole, I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable an animal, nor one against which I naturally conceived so strong an antipathy" (Swift 2). Towards the end of the story, it becomes obvious that the Yahoos are an exaggeration of mankind itself. More accurately, they represent the savage side of humanity. " Disgusting as the picture is, it still conveys an important moral lesson: it is a probable delineation of what humanity might become if exposed to the brutalizing influences of unregulated passions" (Kallich 70). Moreover, the amoral characteristics of human society appear to be just as bad, if not worse than those of the Yahoos. In fact, the horses of the Utopian society are shocked when they hear Gulliver's descriptions of all the vices of people and society. Indeed, Gulliver's description of the causes of wars is particularly astounding. It is a very justifiable cause of a war to invade a country after the people have been wasted by famine, destroyed by pestilence, or embroiled by factions among themselves. It is justifiable to enter into war against our nearest ally, when one of his towns lies convenient for us, or a territory of land, that would render our dominions round and complete. If a prince sends forces into a nation where the people are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put half of them to death, and make slaves of the rest, in order to civilize and reduce them from their barbarous way of living. (Swift 13) Shortly after this selection, the horse to whom Gulliver explains the

reasons of war draws quite a few connections between the humans and Yahoos by describing some of the very aggressive activities of the latter that suspiciously resemble the wars of mankind. Certainly, this passage indicates how the sovereigns of many countries can hide their selfish quest for power behind honorable motives. “ The [justifiable’ is stripped of the rationalizing euphemism of diplomacy and seen for what it really is: Reason of State and Realpolitik are just abstract shields for inhuman opportunism and blatant crimes” (Knowles 124). Likewise, this is a fairly obvious use of irony: Swift calls these actions “ very justifiable” when the way he describes them indicates that he does not really mean this. This instance is simply one of many examples throughout the voyage of Swift satirizing the greed and primitive nature of humanity. Even though Gulliver becomes a misanthrope by the end of the book, this viewpoint is not the one that Swift intends for the reader. At the end of the voyage, Gulliver is forced to return home, by the decree of the Houyhnhnms. When he arrives home, he cannot tolerate the sight of another human being (including his family) because he believes that, deep down, they are truly Yahoos. Many have argued that this is the opinion Swift wants his readers to take up. After all, at one point he did say, “ I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is towards individuals” (qtd. in Rowse 143). However, Swift made Gulliver far more misanthropic than he could realistically expect anyone to be. After his voyage, Gulliver forces his wife and son to eat dinner at the other end of a very long table. Swift intended for the reader to perceive this as silly and perhaps think him a little crazy. “ Swift, in constructing the narrative of Gulliver’s transformation from a [lover of mankind’ into a perfect misanthrope, went out of his way to introduce various signs into the story

the natural effect of which would be to discredit, for attentive readers the extreme conclusions drawn by Gulliver himself from his stay in Houyhnhnmland" (Crane 334-335). Similarly, Gulliver is rescued and brought back to Europe by a Portuguese Captain by the name of Don Pedro. The Captain is extraordinarily nice to Gulliver, who still despises him on account of his being a Yahoo. " The Captain had often entreated me to strip myself of my savage dress, and offered to lend me the best suit of clothes he had. This I would not be prevailed on to accept, abhorring to cover myself with anything that had been on the back of a Yahoo" (Swift 35). Obviously, Gulliver's refusal to wear something that had simply touched a Yahoo is a little on the extreme side. The last character discussed in the novel (other than Gulliver) happens to be a man with numerous virtues. Swift obviously wants his readers to see that, because of his experiences, Gulliver's views on human nature are not exactly fair and rational. Had Swift meant us to take seriously Gulliver's 'antipathy to human kind,' wouldn't he have made his rescuer an unmistakable Yahoo? And isn't his emphasis on Don Pedro's virtues a plain indication, therefore, that he wanted us to think of Gulliver, at this final stage, as a person so infatuated with a false or one-sided theory of human nature that he is blind to any facts which contradict it? (Crane 335)Gulliver obviously shares the point of view of his equine friends. If that view is wrong, it means that the Houyhnhnms are not the infallible beings originally portrayed. Clearly, if their main purpose is not a perfect race to which man should be compared, they must have another function in the story. The Houyhnhnms, though apparently perfect beings, are actually just clever imitations of the Augustans. As said before, the Augustans dedicated their lives to reason and truth. Much like the Augustans, everything the

Houyhnhnms do is based on a scientific process. In their marriages they are exactly careful to choose such colors as will not make any disagreeable mixture in the breed. Strength is chiefly valued in the male, and comeliness in the female; not upon the account of love, but to preserve the race from degenerating; for where a female happens to excel in strength, a consort is chosen with regard to comeliness. (Swift 25) This is a prime example of Swift's use of irony to aid him in his satire. Throughout the story, he frequently mentions how good the society of the Houyhnhnms is when, through his description of their lifestyle, he actually shows the opposite. The lives of the horses lack passions, pleasures, and ideas. Even if they have no evils in their society, they have no real benefits either. If deleting all the risks in life is what it takes to eliminate vice, shouldn't mankind accept the necessity of a little bit of evil? The world in which the Houyhnhnms live is far from perfect. "The horses have, in fact, no passions at all. Their 'virtue' is not a triumph over impulse and temptation, but a total immunity from these things and an immunity which is also, by its very nature, an absence of life and vitality. If they are incapable of human bestiality they are even less capable of human glory or sublimity" (Dyson 681). Swift is brilliantly making fun of the Augustan goal. After all, the "Houyhnhnm" scenario is the way the Augustans strove to live their lives. Later, in the Romantic period, they would be criticized for their scientific approach to everything and their strict adherence to reason. In this way, Swift was ahead of his time, and, although his book did not glorify emotion or anything of that nature, it certainly ridiculed the Augustans and their ideals. "Book IV is still valid, in fact, as a satire upon Augustanism itself. The Augustans, at their most characteristic, disapproved of strong emotions as necessarily disruptive, subordinated even

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those emotions they could not exile to the stern control of 'Right Reason,' and found no place for 'feeling' in their search for 'truth'" (Dyson 682). The Augustans were a product of the Enlightenment, and with the help of social commentaries like Swift's, they began to die out as people began to see how senseless a life dedicated to reason truly was. Hence, the ironical ridicule of the Augustans was just as integral to Book IV as depiction of humans as Yahoos. The whole system of Houyhnhnmland is, in fact, an allegory. The horses represent true reason and the Yahoos pure emotion. Either one of these taken to an extreme is dangerous. If people let emotion completely rule them, they end up with a society without order, such as the Yahoos. On the other hand, if people dedicate themselves entirely to logic, they produce a society with plenty of order, but no vitality. A healthy community has a good mixture of the two. Swift leaves subtle clues like Gulliver's illogical misanthropy at the end to indicate that one must see the value in both. Sadly, it is easy for a reader to walk away thinking that Swift thinks humanity to be evil. This piece in particular requires multiple readings to gather the true meaning of it. Indeed, there are many interpretations of the piece that criticize Swift for indicating that a flawless society could exist without religion of any kind. Obviously, the author of the criticism could not have possibly understood that the Houyhnhnms simply symbolized all that was rational, and religion would have been out of place in that context. Partially because of such subtleties, the Fourth Voyage, and indeed all of Gulliver's Travels, contains outstanding satire. In fact, in a bizarre way, Swift almost betrays readers with his satire. He wins their trust with a tone of friendly conversation, and then begins to ruthlessly attack. Perhaps this was even why he was so effective. He also mastered irony by the time he died, as seen <https://assignbuster.com/the-duality-of-book-four-of-gullivers-travels/>

in his "A Modest Proposal." His assaults on society did make people question themselves and their institution, and in a way, they did help to "wonderfully mend the world." Works Referenced Crane, R. S. "The Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos, and the History of Ideas." Greenburg 402-6. Crane, R. S. "The Rationale of the Fourth Voyage." Greenburg 331-8. Dyson, A. E. "Swift: The Metamorphosis of Irony." *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*. Ed. Robert Greenburg. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973. 672-84. Glendinning, Victoria. *Jonathan Swift: A Portrait*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. Greenburg, Robert, ed. *Gulliver's Travels: An Authoritative Text*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976. Kallich, Martin. *The Other End of the Egg*. Bridgeport: Conference on British Studies, 1970. Knowles, Ronald. *Gulliver's Travels: The Politics of Satire*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1990. Rowse, A. L. *Jonathan Swift: Major Profit*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1975. Swift, Jonathan. "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms." *Gulliver's Travels*. Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg. Available <http://www.gutenberg.net>