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Philosophy



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More Than Just a Children's Story Gulliver's Travels took Europe by storm as it circulated through the general public. The story captivated the imaginative minds of both children and adults as it detailed a man's journey through many fantasy worlds, containing tiny dwarves, intimidating giants, floating islands, and talking horses. Although the story entertained countless families, Swift had a larger vision for his literary piece. He uses the childish dream of Gulliver's Travels as a tool to satirize the larger aspects of his society at the time, including political rival Sir John Vanbrugh, science and the Age of Reason, and modern philosophers. Although Swift had many political enemies, he uniquely targeted Sir John Vanbrugh and his architecture in Gulliver's Travels. Hart records the history of the two men's political rivalry beginning with the reign of Queen Anne of England in the eighteenth century. Swift, who tended to share her Anglican religious views, played an active role in the Tory government. After Queen Anne's death, the Whigs, the political rival of the Tories, ascended into power and persecuted the Tories for treason against the English nation. The conflict between the low-heels and high-heels can be seen as a direct parallel to the conflict between the Tories and Whigs. With the collapse of the Tory government, Swift's political ambitions and hopes collapsed as well. Leading the new Whig government was Swift's great enemy, Sir John Vanbrugh. Swift despised the fact that while his political power declined, Vanbrugh's was rapidly growing. As Vanbrugh went on to become a prominent architect in England by constructing the estates of powerful politicians, his architecture consequently became a target for Swift's satire. Mejico 2 Hart notes, " As an architect, Vanbrugh was unique in receiving direct criticism from Swift,

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attacks which continued throughout his career. Superficially both men were similar...However, Swift was a Tory and Vanbrugh a Whig. " The two men's political differences led Swift to target Vanbrugh and his work in the story. At the time Gulliver's Travels was circulating around England, only the elite were aware of the satirical attacks on Vanbrugh and his architecture, which had become extremely popular throughout the country as a symbol of the Whigs' power. One of the main criticisms of Vanbrugh's architecture was its small achievements compared to the past. Swift held the past and all of its great achievements in high regard and felt that the modern achievements were simply inadequate. This concept of " big" and " small" houses in Gulliver's Travels can be read as a ridicule of Vanbrugh's insufficient architecture in comparison to his predecessors (Hart). In regard to Vanbrugh's architecture, the concept of " big" and " small" houses may also be a direct attack on his personal house. Hart notes that Vanbrugh had constructed his own house after a fire, but " Vanbrugh's house appears to have vainly tried to look larger than it was. " Swift had nicknamed the house " Goose-pie" to mock its smallness. Vanbrugh's " Goose-pie" can be seen as a direct parallel to Gulliver's little house, as Hart points out. In the second book, Swift describes Gulliver's little house as " not much bigger than what I [Gulliver] have seen in a London toy-shop" in comparison to those of the giants, while also noting that " my [Gulliver's] little chair and table were placed at his [the King's] left hand, before one of the salt-cellars" (II, iii). The absurdity of Gulliver's little house and furniture plays as a recurrent image throughout Book II. Both Gulliver's and Vanbrugh's houses share the same comical comparison of being seen as toy buildings by Swift. Swift takes a more direct attack at Vanbrugh himself in Book III of Gulliver's Travels. "

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There was a most ingenious architect, who had contrived a new method for building houses, by beginning at the roof, and working downward to the foundation; which he justified to me, by the like practice of those two prudent insects, the bee and the spider" (III, v). The 'ingenious architect' that Swift refers to is none other than Sir John Vanbrugh. Swift utilizes verbal irony to poke fun at him by attributing an incredibly ridiculous method of building houses. Anyone who has a brain knows one cannot build a house from the roof to the ground. Swift plays with this ludicrous idea to insult Vanbrugh, his architecture, and his intelligence. In addition to targeting Vanbrugh through his satirical writing, Swift also targeted science and the Age of Reason. Throughout his life, Swift was deeply religious and dreamed of serving his faith. As a young man, Swift left home to become an ordained priest in the Church of Ireland. However, he left because he fell in love with a young woman named Jane Waring. She rejected his marriage proposal, so he promised to never return to Ireland and headed to England (Johnson). There, he became a political writer for the Tories. Before the fall of the Tory government, Swift hoped that his services would be rewarded with a church appointment in England. During Swift's lifetime, a culture movement hooked the minds of many intellectuals: the Enlightenment. The purpose of the movement was to reform society and advance knowledge. It promoted science and intellectual interchange and opposed superstition. It also highlighted the corruption of the Christian Church and criticized its efforts to acquire political power. A key component of the Enlightenment was the ideology of Deism. Deism advocated reason in the place of revelation, leading many to reject miracles and to view the Bible as an ordinary piece of literature rather than as a divinely inspired text. It promoted natural religion

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and argued for the existence of higher being that created all, then stepped back and let natural laws dictate the Mejjico 4 outcome of everything. This Age of Reason inspired many English freethinkers and radicals to challenge the Church and its authority with new rational ideas. The teachings of Christianity and the Age of Reason conflicted on a fundamental level. Christianity preached the existence of a higher being that created the world and all of its contents. Proponents of science and reason argued that the existence of a higher being could not be proved, so therefore did not exist. They argued that the existence of something could only come to be through careful observation and a " God" could not be observed. They also tried to undermine the Church and all of its authority by revealing the greed and corruption. Such radical thoughts eventually led to the desire of the Protestants to rebel against the Catholic Church and break away. Swift was outraged by these intrusions against his Church and faith. He saw this as direct attacks on not only the institution, but everything he had grown to believe throughout his life. Bentman explains Swift's view of this new movement: " Swift saw in many contemporary movements a naïve optimism, the beginning of an excessive faith in abstract schemes and ideologies, to the exclusions of awareness of man's complexity, which was to lead mankind into trouble" (544). Swift believed that too much faith in science was dangerous and warned against it. He believed this new science has not been around long enough to fully trust in it or its teachings, so he prefers the older, more solid teachings of the past. He viewed science as somewhat arrogant in its persistence to explain and define everything, even those things which were not meant to be explained or defined. The Houyhnhnms in Gulliver's Travels can be seen as a satirical attack on a world

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driven by pure reason. Although Gulliver views their society as the epitome of rational thought and science, the horses seem simple, boring, and lifeless. Their language lacks spirit, their mating is deprived of love, and their comprehension of the complex play of social forces is a bit naïve. What is missing in the horses is exactly that which makes human life rich: the complicated interplay of love, hate, altruism, selfishness, and all other emotions. Swift writes, “ Their marriages are arranged for them by their elders, on eugenic principles, and their language contains no word for ‘ love’, in the sexual sense. When somebody dies they carry on exactly as before, without feeling any grief, ” (IV, viii). In other words, the Houyhnhnms’ society is perfect for the Houyhnhnms, but it is hopeless for humans. Swift creates this conundrum of the perfect rational society that lacks human emotion to prove the point that reason and science cannot solely satisfy humans; we thirst for more, a spiritual longing for a connection with something or someone more significant than any one of us. Swift sees religion as the only source to quench this thirst and so renounces the teachings of the Enlightenment movement. Swift also attacks the arrogance of science, reflected through the Houyhnhnms’ belief that they already know everything so there is no need to argue. They had no word in their language for “ opinion” because everyone was in general accord. The level of conformity eventually reached a point in which a police force was no longer necessary. Orwell comments on the totalitarian society of the Houyhnhnms: ‘ Reason,’ among the Houyhnhnms, he [Gulliver] says, ‘ is not a Point Problematical, as with us [Europeans], where men can argue with Plausibility on both Sides of a Question; but strikes you with immediate Conviction; as it must needs do, where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by Passion and Interest.’ In <https://assignbuster.com/raymond-mejico/>

other words, we know everything already, so why should dissident opinions be tolerated? The totalitarian Society of the Mejico 6 Houyhnhnms, where there can be no freedom and no development, follows naturally from this. Swift mocks this society for being arrogant enough to stop debating people's unique views and interpretations. He creates this totalitarian society as a caveat to the future of the European society if it continued on its path for absolute knowledge. Because they were closely related to the Age of Reason, Swift also satirizes modern philosophers. These modern philosophers include Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, René Descartes, and Francis Bacon just to name a few. He attributed to them the new Age of Reason and viewed them as the leaders of the movement. These men challenged the traditional ways of thought and logic, much to the dismay of the lovers of ancient philosophy. Ancient philosophers include Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as well as many others. Swift treasured the teachings of these ancient philosophers and held them in high regards. Patey notes, " Swift characterizes these ' philosophers' as modern-proponents of progress who arrogantly depreciate the knowledge of antiquity, " (809). He viewed the modern philosophers as ungrateful and disrespectful to their predecessors who left a great amount of knowledge and teachings. One of the criticisms of these modern philosophers is their failure to achieve their much-advertised results. Modern philosophers often preached that they could reasonably conclude the essence of mankind or explain man's behavior. However, philosophers were constantly challenging each other's points of view and so ended up with no real answer. Swift also criticizes modern philosophy for creating the distinction of the ' humanities' and ' science'. " Swift is aware of this shift and satirizes the new division of knowledge from the point of view

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of an older one, " adds Patey (810). During the 17th century, in the midst of the quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, our notions of science begin to emerge. Swift blames modern philosophy for this split in knowledge. His attacks against modern philosophers are most evident in Book III. The Grand Academy of Lagado distributed its buildings not between schools of science or even natural philosophy and politics, but between practical and " speculative learning". The practical learning reflects scientific learning, while speculative learning reflects the humanities. The academy also freely mixes science with philosophy. For example, the projector whose machine combines words at random predicts that his device will be successful in the production of " Books in Philosophy, Poetry, Politics, Mathematics and Theology, " (III, v). Swift intended to protest the illegitimate importation of scientific methods into the ' arts' where they do not belong. He felt that science should not intrude on the other fields of learning, especially on theology. As entertaining as Gulliver's Travels may be, simply reading it as nothing more than a fictional children's story reduces the story to a mediocre, one-dimensional piece of work and robs Swift of the acknowledgement of being a satirical genius. . Hart summarizes the connection between Swift's targets best: " In the context of the eighteenth-century battle between the so-called ' Ancients' and ' Moderns', Swift was indisputably on the side of the former, whilst Vanbrugh came to symbolize for Swift all the modern delusions of ' Reason' and Whig, values that much of his work, including the Travels [Gulliver's Travels], ridiculed. " Swift was able to craft a charming story line while also using satire to target people and ideologies that came into conflict with him. His versatility as an author should be praised rather than dimly recognized by the reader's lack of

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knowledge of the eighteenth-century historical context that surrounded Swift. Mejico 8 Works Cited Bentman, Raymond. " Satiric Structure and Tone in the Conclusion of Gulliver's Travels. " *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 11. 3 (1971): 535-48. JSTOR. Web. 14 March 2012. Hart, Vaughan. " Vanbrugh's Travels. " *History Today*. 42. 7 (1992): 7-26. EBSCOhost. Web. 10 March 2012. Johnson, Samuel. *The Lives of the Most Prominent English Poets, Volume 1*. London: Williams and Sons, 1781. Print. Patey, Douglas. " Swift's Satire on Science and the Structure of Gulliver's Travels. " *ELH*. 58. 4 (1991). 809-39. JSTOR. Web. 10 March 2012. Swift, Jonathan. " Gulliver's Travels. " *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York. W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. Print.