

Humanism in swift's gulliver's travels essay



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Introduction: Man has always been interested in the discovery of the unknown. The movement of the human species in search of better survival opportunities has been a prime driving force in the cross-exchange of information, philosophy and culture, and intellectual evolution. Ever since the sixteenth century, travelogues have found a place in civilizing man. Homer's *Odyssey* (8th Century B. C.) is one of the earliest examples, with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), being closer to modern examples of travel-fictions. Of the above stated works, Swift's work has been the subject of much debating and controversy. The book is full of novel ideas, the nuances and quaintness of the human species viewed through an entirely different perspective. It stands to the credit of the author that the work can be discussed in very many aspects, such as the political satire that is so evident; the obvious pessimism that Swift has displayed through the hero Gulliver, and so on.

This essay shall argue that Swift was essentially a humanist, and due to this he was capable of seeing the human race only all too clearly; " They look upon fraud as a greater crime than theft, ... with a very common understanding, may preserve a man's goods from thieves, but honesty has no fence against superior cunning" (I, vi), he laments. This essay shall present some glimpses from the work to support the viewpoint, and mention as a part of the discussion other critical views and, conclude with a reinforcement of the perception that *Gulliver's Travels* is indeed the work of an anguished humanist, protesting the rapid changes that took place in his times.

The Protestors of the Enlightenment Era - A Brief: Literature analysts like Ian Johnston (1996), of Malaspina University-College, have expressed the view that this prose work of Swift has been born from the 'Tory Satiric tradition'. During the seventeenth-century, a new rationalist thinking swept Europe's intellectual philosophers, which started questioning the traditional beliefs and practices, in relation to the existence of God in particular, and all things in general. But there were some who feared the loss of faith in traditional values, and their impact on the changing society. Jonathan Swift was amongst those who held the opinion.

He felt that, while Newtonian and Descartes theories were there to stay, the original Christian values and faith in the God, may be lost. He was of the opinion that the rationalists' thinking was a "very dangerous reassertion of pride—a perilous confidence in the powers of human reasoning" (Johnston, 1996). Evidently, this thought finds place as Gulliver's words - "But, when I behold a Lump of Deformity, and Diseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with Pride, it immediately breaks all the Measures of my Patience" (IV, xii), in his description of the hypocrisy of the "Yahoos". Swift would have preferred a more gradual transformation of the society, with the better preservation of moral and spiritual qualities, which shall irrevocably mark the difference between man and beasts. Pope and Samuel Johnson were the other English writers who chose to express their anger and disappointment in the form of satires, with strong political and ethical elements of humor embedded in their works.

Swift the humanist in Gulliver's Travels: Humanism in other words, is the confidence in the basic goodness in Man's nature, wisdom of Man, and may

or may not be associated with religion. Swift had knowledge of the ancient Roman classics. This helped him create new, fantastic countries; living beings and their novel cultures. Through them he has targeted his society, and hence this work is a parody which pokes fun at a rapidly evolving society, developing new, and extreme, rational thoughts, with the hope that the society will reform. In short, he was a Christian humanist.

Samuel Holt Monk, a critic of Swift, in his essay called "The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver," found in the Norton Critical Edition of Gulliver's Travels states, "as a humanist he was concerned for the preservation of those moral and spiritual qualities which distinguish men from beasts and for the health and continuity of fruitful tradition in church, state, and the sphere of the mind". Swift uses the central character Lemuel Gulliver, a doctor and voyager, to voice his themes and bring out his satire. Gulliver, an ordinary, civilized human-being, journeys into unknown territories; in four such voyages, Swift criticizes one aspect of human nature metaphorically, interspersing the narration with abundant political satire. The satire comprises of three possible aspects (Johnston, 1996).

They are:

- 1) Setting the themes in a totally new and quaint country, which, may be faintly recognized by the reader, as having some familiarity to his own. This gave Swift the freedom to distort the characters and, satirize known personalities in wholly different ways, lending it a lampooning style.

- 2) Creating an illusion of perfection, utopia of sorts; his characters' claim of upholding them, even as the reader is made to understand, the differences in the actual adherence, to the very claims made by such characters. This elucidates the hollow pretensions of goodness and lofty purpose.
- 3) The portrayal of the main character Gulliver is a technique by itself-introducing him as a contemporary, fellow-citizen; he is then modified into a person who attracts comical amusement in his representation of the normal.

Familiar personalities set in the background of a strange new place, full of ridiculous creatures, superficially perfect. Swift's angry cry is actually a warning, reminding the society, of the perils of rational thinking. Human beings do have a tendency to display fear of new things, initially. Swift, the humanist too, had his own fears of the turbulent and conflicting changes of his period, and Gulliver, his creation to carries a part of this in him.

Starting from the first part, one can find numerous examples to illustrate this. A case in the point is the seemingly trivial matter of " how eggs are to be broken?" in Book I and Lilliputans are distorted versions of then existing Europeans themselves. Consider the following illustration, " going to eat an egg, and breaking it according to the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the Emperor his father published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us there have been six rebellions raised on that account; wherein one Emperor lost his life, and another his crown" (I, iv). Here, one sees the sheer

ridiculousness of the so-called royal proclamations, which are but, visible, laughable distortions of the then existent court life, complete to the ostentatious demeanor of the officials, and most familiar religious squabbles. According to the Lilliputian cultural perception, it is totally acceptable to choose Lilliputian government officials by their rope-dancing skills, but to Gulliver and the reader appears as arbitrary and ridiculous. What is to be noted here is that, throughout the work, Gulliver always maintains a humble and polite posture, and never is critical openly of the citizens directly. Instead, he appears comical and ridiculous to them, the inhabitants of the new world. Similarly, the size difference between the Lilliputians and him are gentle mockeries of humanity's obsessions with power and size. It is obvious that, Gulliver could have easily overcome the Lilliputians, because of his size; but he respects them and even praises their king.

So too, in *A Voyage to Brobdingnag*, Book II, Swift expresses a disparaging view of the human anatomy, while simultaneously ridiculing the European emphasis on outward appearance, or physical beauty. The Giant King of Brobdingnag remarks to Gulliver, "I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (II, vi). Herein, Swift presents his country in a different perception - how other people of the world could perceive them, in all their faults and pretensions.

Probably the best example of Swift's humanism is brought out in the fourth part. What one sees in the fourth part is the near complete transformation of Gulliver, the hero, who sets out in the first voyage as a normal English doctor setting sail to distant lands. Hence, in the first part - "A Voyage to Lilliput", <https://assignbuster.com/humanism-in-swifts-gullivers-travels-essay/>

he behaves like a typical Englishman, giving due importance to royalty, court and the like. He gradually changes, even while retaining some of his original traits. In the fourth part, "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms", he addresses a horse as his master - "My principal endeavor was to learn the language, which my master (for so I shall henceforth call him) and his children, and every servant of his house, were desirous to teach me" (IV, iii). On his return he becomes a misfit, being no longer able to maintain the ties as a normal person would in the European society, worse still, not even within his close family. Swift seems to have conveyed a message here; that there is something quite unpalatable about social life in his native land; and since Gulliver had understood this fact, he preferred to rebuild his own life among his domestic horses, than return to a normal family life in England (Johnston, 1996).

This seems to be the worst condemnation of the then existing European Society. But, here again, there is proof that, Swift was a humanist first. He divides the inhabitants of the island into two types - "The wise and virtuous Houyhnhnms, who abound in all excellencies that can adorn a rational creature, have no name for this vice in their language" (IV, xii) and the Yahoos "were the most filthy, noisome, and deformed animal which nature ever produced, so they were the most restive and indocible, mischievous and malicious: they would privately suck the teats of the Houyhnhnms' cows, kill and devour their cats, trample down their oats and grass, if they were not continually watched, and commit a thousand other extravagancies" (IV, ix). While it may be argued that there are some misanthropic elements in this part, it should be borne in mind that Gulliver's character may have been

deliberately made to over-react to the situation, in order to deepen the contrasting aspects of the horse-like wise heads and the human-like deformed abhor-able creatures; and to shock the readers, in order to get his (Swift's) message through.

The message can be understood as a sort of warning, as to what is likely to happen to those who move further and further away Biblical and Platonic beliefs and way of understanding. Thus, it seems that it is the underlying Christian humanist in Swift that guides and mends the character of Gulliver for a large part. There are however, many critics who are of the opinion that, he is almost a pessimist and non-believer and, he uses his references to the power above, as a façade. George Orwell, for one, has opined that Swift was “ a Tory Anarchist, despising authority while disbelieving in liberty” (Orwell, 1946, p. 243). Dr. Johnson, another critic of Swift, has remarked “ The suspicion of his irreligion proceeded in a great measure from his dread of hypocrisy; instead of wishing to seem better, he delighted in seeming worse than he was” (1958, p. 373-4).

Conclusion: As seen from the above examples, Swift has created Gulliver, who sees the world through his humanist eye. Thus, Gulliver's Travels can be understood as a humanist's plea to retain at least some of the old values, before the modern world embarks headlong, into a quest for rational explanations for all things under the sun. It is clearly understood as an outcry at the worst possibilities, arising from his deep understanding of the human nature.