



# The Complex Interplay of Utopian and Dystopian Elements in Gulliver's Travels

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## Abstract

Gulliver's Travels has been written by Jonathan Swift and is considered to be one of the most important works of literature that combines elements of both utopia and dystopia to point at the flaws of society and politics of the time. This research paper therefore seeks to examine how these two seemingly opposing aspects co-exist in the text and how Swift uses both the utopian and dystopian features to create satire and engage the reader in critical thinking about the human existence and the society. This is an exploration at the two societies that Gulliver encounters in his travels: Lilliput and Brobdingnag in order to analyse the utopian elements that are depicted in the book. Such societies, which seem to be perfect at first glance, are described as sinister and distorted, which refer to Swift's satirical vision of early 18th-century European politics and perceiving of the world. In Lilliput, the size of the society is small, which shows how political issues are small and unimportant while in Brobdingnag the people are giant which is an illustration of how pride and vices are also giant-sized. This research delves to advance the knowledge of Swift's satirical approaches and the involving themes of Gulliver's Travels, how the juxtaposition of utopia and dystopia serves to enrich the satire upon the contemporary world as well as the timeless reflection upon human nature.

**Keywords:** Utopianism, dystopianism, satire, societal critique, & human nature.

## Introduction

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift is one of the most famous examples of literary satire which offers a rather pessimistic vision of human and social essence through depiction of the fictional countries and their inhabitants. Published in 1726 the novel is most famous for the satire of the early eighteenth century English society and politics. In the novel, Swift goes with a protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, to four different regions of Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa and the land of the Houyhnhnms all of which are used to offer a portrayal of European society and human behaviour in the 18th century.

Therefore, the plot of the novel is in the meetings with societies that have both the characteristics of a utopia and a dystopia. Lilliputians are people of a small stature and their disputes and concerns are as petty as political issues in Swift's society. Similarly, Brobdingnag which is home to giants inflates human vices as well as social flaws and hence exposes the ugly side of human hub and sin. On the other hand, Houyhnhnms are realistic and rational people who depict an ideal society of people of reason while the other, the Yahoos represent the worst in people.

Lilliput is a society which, in many respect seems to be ideal; it has a well-organized political system. However, if one takes a look at the small-scale society that is depicted on the picture, one can see a subtle irony of political wars' pettiness.

The conflict between the Big-Endians and Little-Endians over the correct end of an egg epitomizes this triviality: "The two great parties into which the kingdom is split up are big-endians and little-endians. Big-endians are those who believe in the Big End of the egg while little-endians are those who believe in the Little End of the egg." This preposterous argument is an allegory of the real political bickering that was going on in the time that Swift was writing his works in and serves to show people how childish. Similarly, Brobdingnag is depicted as the ideal world due to the giant people who are in a position to have a closer look at Gulliver and his world which is all the more big but looks big only from a distance. The King of Brobdingnag reflections on European practices reveal Swift's satirical critique: "I have always considered the state of man as a perpetual struggle" (Part II, Chapter 5, p. 135). This point of view also stresses the grotesque of human vices and the ineffectiveness of organizations if viewed from a different perspective.

On the other hand, the geographical location of the Houyhnhnms is an epitome of a perfect world whose governance is based on reason and virtue. But this notion has been painted in an idealistic perspective while the Yahoos who are the equal of humans are painted in a crass way. The Houyhnhnms' disdain for the Yahoos is evident in their characterization: These are the most detestable of all creatures" (Part IV, Chapter 7, p. 212). Still, it is in this way

that this contrast is employed not only to parody the lost opportunity of rational constructivism but also the essence of man and his flaws.

Thus, it is to the reflection on the elements of both utopia and dystopia in Swift's work that one can attribute the identification of the satirical procedures and the thematic concerns of the author. Such differences in portraying the two fictional societies provide a perspective of the real world, which answers why the human being is an imperfect creature in his endeavor to develop the perfect world. In this respect, by employing the various experiences of Gulliver, Swift is in a position to give a multi-faceted view of the sociopolitical systems of the eighteenth century and to compel the reader to contemplate on the notion of human striving and the reality of human organization.

Science fiction and dystopian literature per se has always been the way writers used to convey their discontent with society and talk about philosophies and the idea of world. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* can also be considered as the work that reflects the tendency towards both utopian and dystopian approaches as the reader is offered a range of societies described in the novel.

In the historical literature, the term utopia has been used in relation to depiction of perfect societies with perfect social, political and even moral systems. They are normally an indication of a bad situation in the author's society in the present by portraying an ideal one. More, Thomas – *Utopia* (1516) is one of the first works of the genre, which describes the society that has the common property and the rational management.

The Yahoos as represented by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* can be seen to have features that depict dystopia. The Yahoos are the creatures whose form is similar to the biped animals and they are created from Gulliver, so they are the degenerated, filthy race which is involved in the perverted actions. Gulliver's disgust of the Yahoos is the moral low point and the sin that Swift saw in people. In part IV, chapter 1, he describes them as 'the most filthy, noisome, and deformed animals which nature ever produced'. This is a very vivid picture which is a kind of message about sins of people and a chance for degeneration of the society.

*Gulliver's Travels* can be considered as a work that combines the features of the utopian and dystopian literary genre, where the author, using the interaction of the mentioned components, creates a multifaceted work that stigmatizes human vices and society. The use of the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos enables Swift to depict the best and the worst that is in a man. This interplay portrays the concept of the existence of the best and the worst in people and the balance between the perfect world and the terrible world.

Furthermore, what Swift does is create another layer to the utopian and dystopian traditions because he is satirical. Not only does he amuse himself and the reader, but he educates through satire and makes the audience think about the culture and the manners of people of his era. This makes *Gulliver's Travels* as a forerunner to other fictions in the genre that combines fantastic worlds and satire.

Therefore, *Gulliver's Travels* can be considered a part of the utopian and dystopian tradition as the work that offers a complex view on society and its flaws by using the elements of the fantastic travel. Hence, Swift's work enriches the tradition of the genre and gives a rather complex view of human possibilities and vices while remaining a significant object of analysis for literature students due to its relevance and depth.

Lilliput is the first country Gulliver comes across and it is a country of six inch people. Lilliputians are tiny people, yet they have a developed and structured society with its hierarchy. The kingdom is governed by an emperor and it is also under strict rules and regulations as well as having certain customs. All classes of society are presented: from nobles to average citizens, and all types of occupations, from administrators to soldiers. The Royal City of Mildendo is also described in great detail including the magnificent palace and the extensive city paved with streets and lanes. Gulliver writes: "The metropolis is about 500 yards in circumference, the wall at least eleven feet high and a strong flanking tower at every ten feet" (Swift, Part I, Chapter 4). Such attention to architectural features underlines the inventiveness of the Lilliputians and the complexity of their civilization.

It can be seen that Lilliput is used by Swift to caricature the political and social structures of eighteenth century England. The rivalry and the power struggle between the two kingdoms of Lilliput are reminiscent of the European monarchies' petty disputes. For example, the war between the Lilliputians and their neighboring island Blefuscu over the proper method of cracking a boiled egg alludes to the real life warfare that are fought over petty issues. This is a clear indication that all true believers will crack it at the right end as Gulliver puts it, (Part I, Chapter 4). This ridiculous dictum is clearly symbolic of religious as well as political tensions characteristic of Swift's era, especially the Protestant-Catholic struggle. The method of the selection of the government officials in Lilliput where the candidates are to show their abilities in acrobatic performance on a rope hung between two poles is the parody of the arbitrary and often absurd criteria of political appointments. In the same way, Gulliver notes that whoever jumps the highest without falling, is successful in the office (Part I, Chapter 3). This satire is against the system which does not hold merit and where one's qualification for politics is determined by a mere coat.

Unlike Lilliput, Brobdingnag is a country of giants in which Gulliver feels like an oversized man surrounded by giants. The society of Brobdingnag is very simple; they are rational and have a moral principle in their conduct. Some of the characters can be described as representing an ideal ruler, for instance, the king of Brobdingnag who is depicted as a philosopher king who cares for his subjects. The society of Brobdingnagians is depicted as being well-organized and in terms of justice. The king's palace is beautiful but functional which, as has already been mentioned, is characteristic of the Brobdingnagians. Gulliver pointed out that the houses are very well built but are not very elaborate (Swift, Part II, Chapter 2). This description goes well to show how the society is more concerned with the substance rather than the style.

Thus, Brobdingnag becomes a tool for satire of the European society, with its stress on moral and ethical vices. Of all the responses that the king of Brobdingnag gave to Gulliver's accounts of European politics and warfare, this particular one is most revealing. He even shows surprise and loathsome feelings towards the Europeans referring to them as the most "pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (Swift, Part II, Chapter 6). This harshest of judgements is as a result of Swift's criticism of the aspects of violence, corruption and pettiness that he associated with European civilization. This form of governance and justice is in sharp difference with what the Lilliputians and Europeans have in their societies. There are very few laws, simple laws that make sense and

which are enacted in the interest of the general populace. It is important to note that Gulliver says, "He had no more than seventy-two laws, which all respected the public good" (Swift, Part II, Chapter 7). This and the fact that the concern of Brobdingnag is with the general welfare of its people underscore the utopian nature of Brobdingnag and its caricaturing of Europe as complicated and self-serving.

By depicting the aspects of Lilliput and Brobdingnag as a utopia, Swift is in fact using the novel *Gulliver's Travels* to provide a satire of the political and social systems of his time. In this regard, the grotesque features of these fictional societies make it easier to put a mirror to real human nature and the existing values in society and see the possibilities of change.

In *Gulliver's Travels* the Houyhnhnms are portrayed as a society of people whose behaviour is based on reason, rationality and morality. These horse-like creatures depict a utopian form of leadership and community living free from human sinful nature. The Houyhnhnms society is rational and exists in a society where all their decisions and actions are informed by justice and morality that is missing from the human society. Gulliver describes them as creatures who live in perfect harmony, guided by reason alone: "Among the Houyhnhnms the two primary values are friendship and benevolence" (Part IV, Chapter 8). Their society is one free from deceit, corruption, or conflict because they are living accordingly to nature and truth.

The Houyhnhnms' concept of rationality and morality is opposed to the human societies. Lack of words as well as their inability to even comprehend the idea of lying or being false. Gulliver is impressed with their reasonable way of living as they have no word in their language for lying or falsehood (Swift, Part IV, Chapter 4). Their social relationships are rational, and hence, there are no conflicts in the society; no one needs to enforce the provisions of the law by force. The suppression of passion and emotions to embrace reason is an important feature of the Houyhnhnms' existence in the society since it is rationality that the society values most.

On the other hand, the Yahoos are the negative aspects of Swift's work and can be considered as the dystopian characters of the story. Yahoos are portrayed as barbaric, immoral and barbarous creatures who have no shred of civilization or reason in them. They are depicted with much vigour and their actions depict the worst in human beings. Gulliver is shocked with their looks and behaviours; he says, "In all my travels, I never saw a more disagreeable animal, nor one with whom I had so natural a dislike" (Swift 215, Part IV, Chap 1). The society of Yahoos is barbarous and based on the vices of people while the Houyhnhnms are an embodiment of order and reason.

The satire of the modern society is well depicted by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. Through the juxtaposition of the two types of societies, Swift reveals the weaknesses and sins of the 18th-century England, the major problems of which include political corruption, deterioration of morality, and the decline of reason. His use of satire such as the use of exaggeration and irony, therefore, bring out the element of absurdity and hypocrisy during his time. For example, the Yahoos that Gulliver narrated about are a mere exaggeration of the society's vices, which makes the readers to think about their society. It is in this light that one can argue that Swift's narrative is one that seeks to encourage people to self-reflection and change for the better with reference to reason and morality.

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is famous for the satirical approach that the author employs to describe the essence of people and the world. Thus, the society depicted in the book can be considered as existing in between the two extremes, which allows Swift to present a complex message focusing on the problems of the political, social, and philosophical life of the 18th century. His styles of irony include irony and hyperbole, parody and allegory, all of which make the reader gain a better understanding of the text.

The use of satire by Swift is in this respect to expose the vices and the hypocrisies of the societies in the utopian and the dystopian society. For example, the society of Lilliput resembles an ideal one, but it is full of intrigues and officials' bribe-taking. In the quarrel of the Lilliputians and in the outrageous orders of the emperor, Swift is making a mockery of the British government and its politics. Gulliver's description of the Lilliputians' political practices, such as the selection of officials based on their ability to perform physical feats rather than their competence, underscores the absurdity of such a system: "For instance, they inter a Proverb which is so old that its Meaning is quite forgotten, and the Orator pop two or three diminutive words in the middle of it, which in a manner revive it, and set it a-going" (Swift, Part I, Chapter 6). In Brobdingnag however, the author of the book does not stop satirizing but from a different perspective. This is the simple and moral approach which is in contrast to the European courts' dishonesty; the self-righteous attitude of the king of Brobdingnag is quite honest. From the conversation of the king and Gulliver, Swift gives a depiction of the European politics vices, especially that of violence and deceit. The direct and rather crude language that the king uses to describe Europeans as 'the most pernicious vermin that nature allowed to walk in the face of the earth', Part II, Chapter 6, by Swift is a clear condemnation of the political and social culture of the European society.

Other tools used by Swift include the following narrative techniques which heightens the satirical aspect of the work. This is made possible by the choice of a naive and easily fooled narrator through which the author is able to present the rather preposterous aspects of the story with a very straight face which serves to further enhance the comedic and satirical elements of the work and give the reader pause for thought about what is being portrayed as reality. Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians do not doubt the societies they encounter as Gulliver does not, this makes the satire more effective since the readers are not able to point out the absurdity and vices of the societies through Gulliver's eyes. This technique is evident in Gulliver's descriptions of the Houyhnhnms, where his admiration for their rationality blinds him to the potential coldness and detachment of their society: "Here there was no Physician to murder my Flesh, no Lawyer to catch my Money, no Informer to watch my Words and Actions to Libel me for his Pay" (Swift, Part IV, Chapter 4).

In this satire of Swift there are great philosophical and social issues that is painted and portrayed. Realism of Houyhnhnms and absurd Yahoos brings up the question of change in human nature and the society. These themes are embodied in Swift's work and are evidence of his pessimism concerning the search for building a perfect society and the suggested notion of people's wickedness. The Houyhnhnms' rational society which does not allow for passions and emotions is portrayed as something that human beings cannot achieve and maybe should not desire. On the same note, the Yahoos portray the vices of people and to remind Gulliver and the society that in

case it abandons reason and morality, this is what is in store for it.

The relevance of the critique given by Swift can be considered in the fact that all the problems described by him are still actual. The satire in *Gulliver's Travels* is universal because the vices that are depicted by Swift are still evident in the society today. This is why Swift hold a mirror to society, so that people are able to look at their society and think to themselves whether changes is required. His work remains that of critiquing man and society and the prospects of realizing a rational society.

Finally, the work of *Gulliver's Travels* has made an indelible impact on literature and literary critics. The satirical elements in Swift's work have always been an encouragement and still is to many writers and continues being a subject to discussions among critics. Therefore, the concentration on the idea of the utopia and dystopia has helped to guarantee the novel's place as an eternal piece of literature that can be easily discussed and analysed. It can therefore be seen that, by employing humour and satire in the work, Swift ensures that *Gulliver's Travels* remains an important and even today's readers relevant work that will make them ponder over the meaning of the work and its significance in the society of today as well as in the society of the past.

Therefore, the satire which Swift employs and the emphasis on the aspects of the utopia and dystopia as a consequence provide the audience with a very complex view of the political and social concerns of the author's time. Therefore, taking into account the elements of philosophy and the social aspect of the story, Swift provides necessary information about human nature and the idea of the society's transformation. His work is easily understandable to the readers of the 21st century and still, he is educating the society about corruption, hypocrisy, and misuse of power.

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