

Study Guide on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels Parts I & II*

What does Gulliver learn during his first two voyages? Is he a wiser, more virtuous, or more prudent man as a result? Consider, for example, the following statements:

- "I resolved never more to put any confidence in princes or ministers . . ." (102¹).
 - What experiences among the Lilliputians lead Gulliver to make this resolution?
 - Is Gulliver justified in making this resolution? Is he right to apply it universally to princes and ministers?
- "This made me reflect how vain an attempt it is for a man to endeavour doing himself honour among those who are out of all degree of equality or comparison with him" (148).
 - Explain what prompts this reflection of Gulliver's.
 - Is Gulliver right to take this with him as a general truth? Is he wiser as a result?

What do we, the readers, learn during these voyages? What is "the truth" which Gulliver claims in the *Letter* "immediately strikes every reader with conviction" (28)? In what sense are the first two voyages true?

Consider Gulliver's character, as revealed in the *Letter* and *Parts I & II*. What is Swift trying to portray in such a character? How does Gulliver himself become a part of the experience of the work?

- Is he gullible? If so, how much so, and in what ways? Does this gullibility lead him astray in his actions? In his judgments?
- Is Gulliver a good man? Is he virtuous?
- Is Gulliver a truthful man? Depending on your answer, how does this affect the way we read Gulliver's account of his travels?
- Does Gulliver represent Europeans in general? How so, or why not? Should his mistakes be seen as a special critique of European or British society?

Is the King of Brobdingnag, after his discussions with Gulliver about England, justified in concluding "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" (157)? How does Gulliver receive this judgment? What does this reaction reveal about Gulliver's character?

¹ Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. In *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, edited by Miriam Kosh Starkman, 23-321. New York: Bantam Dell, 1962. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



“I thought we were already overstocked with books of travels: that nothing could now pass which was not extraordinary, wherein I doubted some authors less consulted truth than their own vanity or interest, or the diversion of ignorant readers” (172). How does Gulliver’s own book of travel hold up against these charges? For what purpose has Gulliver written these accounts?

What perspective on human life and human society does Gulliver gain in Lilliput and Brobdingnag? Are the things that Gulliver learns during his first voyage consistent, contradictory, or complementary to what he learns during the second? Do the two experiences shed light on one another? Consider:

- Who judges whom in each island (that is, Gulliver, the native inhabitants, or both)? Who is inferior to whom in each island?
 - What judgments are made, by Gulliver and by the natives, in each island?
 - What light do these shed on the judges themselves, and what light on the objects judged?
- Whose vision extends further in each island?
- What just conclusions are drawn about the individual or society in each island?

Which society does Gulliver admire more—that of Lilliput, or of Brobdingnag? Why does he prefer it? In which society is he better off?

Consider the following questions about particular experiences in the first two voyages:

- Was Gulliver right or wrong to put out the fire? Why do the Lilliputians get enraged about the offense? What does this reveal about the relation between Gulliver and the Lilliputians?
- Is the king of Brobdingnag right to refuse the technology of gun-powder? Why does Gulliver react the way he does?
- Why in Brobdingnag does Gulliver seem to be fit company only for ladies? Why is he ridiculous there but not in Lilliput?

How does difference in size relate to the differences in character and institutions between the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians?

- Consider the following passages:
 - “Human creatures are observed to be more savage and cruel in proportion to their bulk” (112).
 - “Reason did not extend itself with the bulk of the body: on the contrary, we observed in our country that the tallest persons were usually least provided with it” (151).
- Does Gulliver’s experience in these two voyages confirm these sentiments? If not, what does it show instead?

What is the significance of the ending of Part II? How has Gulliver’s voyage affected his living in England? Does he return in good shape, or not? If not, does he recover?



What kind of work is *Gulliver's Travels*? In what state of mind should we read it? What do you think motivates Swift in this writing? Consider the definition of *satire*, and what techniques it involves. How does Swift put these to work in *Gulliver's Travels*?



Study Guide on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels Parts III & IV*

Consider Gulliver's experience with the Houyhnhnms. Is this the perfect society for rational creatures? Is Gulliver right to judge all things human by the Houyhnhnm standard? Do the Yahoos accurately represent human nature, and if so, are they justly condemned for it?

- Consider the unique characteristics of the Houyhnhnms:
 - "Friendship and benevolence are the two principal virtues among the Houyhnhnms, and these not confined to particular objects, but universal to the whole race" (292–3; see also 299¹). What does it mean to show friendship and benevolence to a race universally? Can friendship be perfected without a particular friend?
 - Are the Houyhnhnms virtuous in not showing special affection for those closer to them (children, spouses, *etc.*)? Does Gulliver think so?
 - If the members of a certain human society had no special love, but only universal love for all, would that society be good? Is there something in human nature which demands peculiar attachments to those who are closer?
 - What motivates the Houyhnhnms' attention to Gulliver? Do they care for his good properly, or only see him as useful, curious, or entertaining (263, 260)?
 - The Houyhnhnms do not understand why Gulliver covers himself with clothes (262). Are they free from any temptation and sin? As such, how well or poorly do they represent man before the fall?
 - The Houyhnhnm society has a distinction based on a "breed" of natural servants (281). What is the reason for this? Is such a system rational? Is it virtuous?
 - Why do the Houyhnhnms hate the Yahoos? Is this reconcilable with their supposition that "all animals [have] a title to their share in the productions of the earth . . ." (277)?
- Are the Yahoos rational? In them do we see the truth about human nature?
 - Do they exhibit the same vices and faults as the Europeans, and the same motivations? (Consider, for example, 285, 286, 321.)
 - Why does Gulliver resent being called "*Yahoo*, an odious animal, for which I had so utter an hatred and contempt" (263)? Is he right to feel only hatred and contempt for them? If so, is he right to apply this to the men and women back in Europe?

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Do the Laputans and the Houyhnhnms both rule themselves in accordance with reason? Are they governed by reason in different ways? Consider the following questions:

- Which society is more speculative, and which more practical? Does either society exclude the other kind of knowledge?
 - Concerning the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver states, “Their grand maxim is to cultivate *reason*, and to be wholly governed by it” (292). How does this play out? Do they truly govern themselves entirely by reason?
 - Gulliver reports about his master that “he would laugh that a creature pretending to *reason* should value itself . . . in things where that knowledge, if it were certain, could be of no use” (292). How would the master judge the Laputans? How might they respond to this judgment?
- How do the two societies stand with regards to the passions? Do the societies try to elevate the passions to reasonableness, rule the passions, or eliminate the passions altogether?
- Is reason the same as virtue? Recall: “Our institutions of government and law were plainly owing to our gross defects in *reason*, and by consequence, in *virtue*; because *reason* alone is sufficient to govern a *rational* creature” (284). Is it right that a defect in reason is a defect in virtue, and vice versa?

What effect does Gulliver have on the Houyhnhnms, during the length of his stay? Consider how his master responds to the community’s exhortation to send Gulliver away (303–5), and how he acts at Gulliver’s send-off (306–7). How does the sorrel nag react, and what is the significance of Gulliver’s claim that the nag “always loved me” (307)? Have either of these two Houyhnhnms been changed through their contact with Gulliver? If so, has it been for the better or for the worse?

Why does Gulliver prefer the society of the Houyhnhnms to that of the Laputans? Is he right to do so?

- What does Gulliver think about the extreme to which the Laputans take their pursuit of speculative, and their contempt for practical tasks? What view do the Houyhnhnms take on this division?
- Why does Gulliver become “heartily weary” of “such disagreeable companions” (199) in Laputa? What happens to Gulliver’s affections for the Houyhnhnms as his time in that country goes on?
- Explain the political intentions and mode of governing of the Laputan king (195 ff.). How does Gulliver interpret this? In contrast, what is the nature of the assemblies of the Houyhnhnms, and how does Gulliver evaluate this mode of “governing”?
- Recall that Gulliver resolves “never to return to human kind, but to pass the rest of my life among these admirable Houyhnhnms . . .” (283). What are the primary causes of this resolution?

Consider the only question ever debated among the Houyhnhnms: “Whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the face of the earth” (295). How do they debate this issue? For example, is their consideration rational, just, humane?



Is Gulliver a better or worse man because of his travels? How does the way Gulliver relates to his family and fellow men change as the travels proceed? (See 256, 283, 303, 311 ff.)

Gulliver claims that “a traveller’s chief aim should be to make men wiser and better, and to improve their minds by the bad as well as good example of what they deliver concerning foreign places” (315). Is this what Gulliver has done? How are we made wiser by reading this book?

How do you think Swift regards reason? What role does it play in the good life? Why is Socrates held up as the best of philosophers (e.g., 292)?

Considering *Gulliver’s Travels* as a whole. What does Swift satirize in each voyage? Is there a progression in the satires? As a whole, what is Swift satirizing? Is there a consistent political teaching that informs the work?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

