

Gulliver's Travels

Jonathan Swift



About the author

Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1667 and came of age at the height of the Glorious Revolution, in which James II, a Roman Catholic, was forced to abdicate in favour of William of Orange, a Protestant. Although he was a great literary figure even in his time, we know very little about his private life. For example, we are not even sure if he married. He became an influential member of the British government but he never achieved the position in the Church of England that he felt he deserved. He was, he felt, banished to the deanship of St. Patrick's and when his party fell from power with the accession of George I, his period in the political limelight came to an end.

Swift died in a mental institution, finally struck down by an illness which had probably been with him for a long time. But he wasn't mad when he wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, a brilliant satire on politics and society, and a timeless book for children.

The original text

Gulliver's Travels is not really a children's book, but it has been seen as a children's story right from the start: little people, big people, talking horses. It was first published in 1726. At the time that Swift published *Gulliver's Travels*, he was dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. The book, which made fun of the political scene and certain prominent people in England, was published anonymously and was a great success.

Summary

In each of the three stories in this book, the hero, Lemuel Gulliver, embarks on a voyage, but, as in the *Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor* on which the stories may in part have

been based, some calamity befalls him. First, Gulliver arrives in Lilliput, where he finds himself a giant, held prisoner by tiny men. They are initially afraid of him, but he gradually wins their trust and eventually helps them in their war against Blefuscu. The second land he visits is called Brobdingnag, a land of giants. Gulliver, now a tiny person, has to work as a freak in a show at first but is then rescued by the Queen and has long talks with the King. Gulliver finally ends up in the land of the Houyhnhnms, peaceful horses who have created a perfect society, except for the presence of monkey-like Yahoos. Although Gulliver looks like a well-kempt Yahoo, he wants to be a Houyhnhnm. Finally, he has to leave because he does not fit into this society.

Part I: A Journey to Lilliput

Chapter 1: Gulliver sets off on the ship *Antelope* to the South Seas, but strong winds wreck it. Gulliver lands on an island and when he wakes up he finds himself tied to the ground. A large number of little men (no larger than Gulliver's hands) keep him prisoner and when he tries to break free, they attack him with arrows. Gulliver stays still not to get hurt. Then they bring him food and drink and plan to take him to the king but still tied with strings.

Chapter 2: He is given a house, an old church, but Gulliver is still tied to the wall of the church. Lilliputians think he is dangerous. Some men attack Gulliver and when the king's men throw them to Gulliver, he pretends he is going to eat them, but then sets them free. Gulliver is kind, so the king will not kill him, and he teaches Gulliver their language. The king promises to untie Gulliver's strings if he follows his written rules. Gulliver hands over his belongings: his sword and his guns. Now he can walk again.

Chapter 3: Gulliver learns about the war between Lilliput and Blefuscu and offers to help the king: he pulls forty large Blefuscu ships to Lilliput. The king is happy, but as he is very ambitious he wants Gulliver to help him kill the Big-enders, enemies of his people, the Little-enders. Gulliver refuses to do so. The people from Blefuscu and Lilliput finally put an end to their war. The king of Blefuscu invites Gulliver to his island. Gulliver finally decides to leave Lilliput and goes to the enemy island.

Chapter 4: After a short stay at Blefuscu, Gulliver leaves for home.

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Part II: Gulliver in Brobdingnag

Chapter 1: When Gulliver sets off again to the Indies, his ship is hit by another storm and he is once again marooned on an unknown island: Brobdingnag, land of giants. He lives on a farm and the farmer's daughter teaches Gulliver their language. The farmer, an ambitious man, makes money by showing Gulliver around the country. Gulliver falls ill.

Chapter 2: When he is brought before the queen of Brobdingnag she buys Gulliver because she likes him a lot. The farmer's daughter stays with him. The king shows interest in England's political system and asks Gulliver questions which embarrass him. He wants to impress the king with his country's wonders only to discover that in Brobdingnag there is no war and people help each other instead of fighting.

Chapter 3: His happy stay ends when a huge bird lifts him high into the air then drops him into the sea, but he is soon rescued and on his way back home again.

Part III: Gulliver in the country of the Houyhnhnms

Chapter 1: After a brief stay with his family, Gulliver sets off again in 1710. His crew falls ill, so he stops for more men in Barbados. The new crew stages a mutiny and keeps Gulliver in his room for a long time until he is left ashore. He ends up in the land of the Houyhnhnms, peaceful horses with a strange language and monkey-like Yahoos who work for them. A grey horse takes him to his house, but Gulliver finds their food distasteful.

Chapter 2: Gulliver learns the new language and talks to his new 'owner', who asks questions about life in Gulliver's country but is puzzled by some of the answers. The horse cannot understand why creatures who think make war and destroy each other. The grey horse has to attend the meeting held every four years, where they discuss important matters.

Chapter 3: Back home, the horse tells Gulliver he should leave because the other horses are afraid he might help the Yahoos against them. Although Gulliver looks like a well-kempt Yahoo, he wants to be a Houyhnhnm and belong to that perfect society but in the end he decides to leave. Even on his return to England, he prefers the company of horses to the company of men, whom he now sees as bestial Yahoos.

Background and themes

Satire as a genre: Satire is a genre in which human or individual vices are exposed by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, with the intention of bringing about improvement. Satire is usually witty, and often very funny. However, its purpose is not to make readers laugh but to criticise an event, an individual or a group in a clever manner.

Voyages around the world: Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels* in the 1720s, when much of the world had not yet been discovered by Europeans. Gulliver, a surgeon, narrates his voyages to foreign lands and calls them 'Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World In Four Parts ... by Lemuel Gulliver.' It was originally received by audiences as merely an exciting adventure. People of this era enjoyed reading literature about travel into unknown lands such as the East Indies (southeast Asia) or the West Indies (islands in the Caribbean Sea).

British political organisation in Swift's times:

When Swift was writing *Gulliver's Travels*, England was undergoing a lot of political shuffling: George I was an unpopular king who had gained his throne with the help of the Whig party. The Whig ministers then used their power against the Tories and Swift, a Tory himself, resented their actions.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- 1 Guess:** Put students into small groups and ask them to make a list of places they expect Gulliver to visit in his travels. Ask students to bring along a map of the world and speculate where Gulliver will go.
- 2 Discuss:** Ask students to work together to describe the picture in the book cover: *Where is Gulliver? Who are the little people around him? How does Gulliver feel? Why?*
- 3 Group work:** Put students in three groups. Each group must consider the problems of living in a particular fantasy land:
Land 1: a place where all the people are very small and you are the only normal-sized person.
Land 2: a place where all the people are giants and you are the only normal sized person.
Land 3: a place where you are the only person; all the other creatures are animals. The students must consider where they would live, what they would eat, how they would travel, the advantage and the dangers of their particular situation.
Each group presents their ideas to the other groups.

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Part I: A Journey to Lilliput

While reading

- 4 **Discuss:** Ask students to work in pairs and place Bristol and the East Indies (nowadays, Southeast Asia) in their maps. Get them to speculate what route the Antelope followed to the East Indies.
- 5 **Role play:** Have students imagine the interaction between Gulliver and the man in the long coat on page 5. Get students to imagine the man's gestures and movements that helped Gulliver understand what he meant.
- 6 **Discuss:** Have students discuss why the people in the story said or thought the following:
'I'm going to die', Gulliver said (page 1)
'I'll stay quiet', Gulliver thought (page 3)
'We have to carry you with the strings around you', the great man said to Gulliver (page 6)
'Don't climb up onto this man's body!' the king's men told him (page 6)
'You can put me on your hand', Reldresal said to Gulliver (page 10)
'I won't help you with that', Gulliver told the king of Lilliput (page 12)
- 7 **Write:** Have students imagine they are one of the great men. You write to a friend of yours and you tell him what you have decided to do with the 'Man-Mountain' and why.

After reading

- 8 **Guess:** Have students check their predictions about Gulliver's adventures in Lilliput from activity 4. Were they right?
- 9 **Discuss:** Ask the students to discuss why the Lilliputians keep Gulliver tied up with strings.
- 10 **Write:** Get students into two groups. One will write a chapter in the story of Lilliput called 'The problems between the Big-enders and the Little-enders' and the other group another chapter called 'How the war between Lilliput and Blefuscu ended.'
- 11 **Role play:** Put students into pairs to role play a conversation between the king of Lilliput and Gulliver. The king wants Gulliver to help him in his war with Blefuscu. Gulliver agrees on certain conditions.

Part II: Gulliver in Brobdingnag

Before reading

- 12 **Guess:** Ask students to look at the pictures in Part II and answer the following: *Will Gulliver's adventures in Brobdingnag be the same or different from his adventures in Lilliput? Why do you think so?*

While reading

- 13 **Role play:** The head man of a village visits the farmer to take a look at Gulliver. Ask the students to role play the conversation between the farmer and the visitor.

- 14 **Discuss:** The big men were kind to Gulliver. Ask students to discuss what the big men did to make Gulliver feel comfortable in their land.

After reading

- 15 **Role play:** Ask students to imagine they all live in Brobdingnag and that two of them have been to the market. They have seen Gulliver. They must explain to the others what he looks like and what he does. The other people don't believe them and ask lots of questions.
- 16 **Discuss:** Have your students compare the political system in their country with England's political system. Have them discuss what type of work the people who make laws do.
- 17 **Pair work:** Explain to students that *Gulliver's Travels* was written as a satire (see Background and themes above). Ask them to work in pairs and make a list of points that Swift is making about English politics in this part of the story. Elicit all the ideas and list them on the board.

Part III: Gulliver in the country of the Houyhnhnms

Before reading

- 18 **Guess:** ask students to look at the picture on page 30, and ask them to guess what the new place Gulliver visits is like.

While reading

- 19 **Research:** Ask students to find information about Barbados. Where is it? What is it like? Would they like to go there? Why/why not?
- 20 **Role play:** The two horses are making noises. Gulliver thinks they are having a conversation about him. Ask students to role play that conversation.
- 21 **Research:** Ask students to find information about the British Parliament at the time. Have them make presentations with their findings.
- 22 **Discuss:** Have students discuss why Gulliver thought 'In many ways they're as bad as the Yahoos here.'
- 23 **Write:** Have students imagine Gulliver wrote a farewell note to his host family of horses. Ask them to write the note.

After reading

- 24 **Discuss:** Have the students work in pairs and make a list of points that Swift is making about English society and politics in this part of the story.
- 25 **Discuss:** Ask students to discuss this question: *Why did Swift choose horses to represent good people and Yahoos (monkey men) to represent bad people?*