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Jonathan Swift and the Universe of *Gulliver's Travels*

Jonathan Swift has always been known as one of the best satirists of his era, but his success in rhetoric seems to be overlooked in academia. The inclusion of universe dynamics in *Gulliver's Travels: Voyage Four* creates an entirely new rhetorical direction which leads the audience to empathize with Gulliver and indirectly agree with his conclusions. Gulliver displays a plethora of different moral characteristics and ideals, and Swift uses these to portray Gulliver as an everyman of sorts. He embodies a range of class dynamics and is impartial to their stereotypes, meaning he can participate in cultural observations objectively and truthfully, which seems to be Swift's main source of rhetorical power. This everyman presents himself as a fair-minded being who appeals highly to the audience's need for ethos by giving them a 'genuine account' of 18th century English society. Swift so beautifully executed Gulliver's sympathetic nature that this narrative seems a natural, and indeed, flawlessly realistic account of an imaginary land, but with careful study, the reader uncovers Gulliver's blatantly inconsistent morality, which accuses sympathetic readers of similar actions. Swift's rhetorical success stems from specific narration techniques, the duality of Gulliver, and a dichotomy of world-building techniques that echoed satirical critiques of 18th century English society.

To understand the entirety of Swift's rhetorical pursuits, the reader must first grasp the dynamic between Gulliver—the character—and Lemuel—the author. While these two persons are both technically Gulliver, they function independently throughout the story, and Swift uses them differently to critique his audience. There is constant "conflict between Gulliver the

author and Gulliver the character. According to M. Seidel, the author-reader relationship in Gulliver's Travels can be defined as a 'contract of fiction'. . . Its verbatim enforcement implies that the narrated adventures are *vraisemblable*" (Popescu 45). Swift simply created the universe that Gulliver experiences, and he uses Gulliver as a rhetorical tool who solely observes events. By separating the individual who actually experienced the events from the individual recording the events, the reader is seduced into believing that Gulliver truly met the Houyhnhnms and Lemuel is simply recording an unbiased recollection of happenings. In reality, Gulliver is simply, "the individual(istic) voice that is completely subordinated to the subjective experience that pervades the narrative of adventure" (Popescu 43). Swift presents Gulliver almost as a victim of true events that Lemuel recorded and manipulated for the audience to explore. Gulliver went through a traumatic experience that forever changed his perception of the world; he began with a love of England and, without intending it, ended with a disgust for all humanity and himself. Lemuel, however, is the cause of the oddities portrayed as Gulliver's. Lemuel, the author, works as Swift's manipulator to make Gulliver seem unreliable by twisting his personification and adding rhetorical commentary that might be counter to the supposed experiences of the character. Dan Popescu uses the analogy of a Trojan horse; Swift uses Gulliver, the honest man who experienced a life changing event, to sneak Lemuel, the satirical commentator, into the minds of the readers. For example, when Gulliver is conversing with his master about lying, Gulliver experienced difficulty in describing this immoral attribute to an entirely rational being, but Lemuel interprets this event under the guise of Gulliver. Lemuel states, "And these were all the notions [the master] had concerning the faculty of *lying*, so perfectly well understood and so universally practised among human creatures" (Swift 251). Swift uses Gulliver's trustworthy account of his interactions with the Houyhnhnms to infer the satirical critique of the lying nature

of Swift's target audience. The 18th century English perceive Gulliver as an unbiased, sympathetic character, but Lemuel, the author, pairs with Gulliver to subtly critique the audience. Unique to Swift, it is, indeed, one of the most clever rhetorical techniques ever applied to satire.

The form of narrative, however, is the first and most obvious rhetorical strategy noticed by the reader, beginning with the first lines of *Voyage Four*. Lemuel begins the account of Gulliver, the character, with the words, "I continued home with my wife and children about five months in a very happy condition, if I could have learned the lesson of knowing when I was well. I left my poor wife big with child and accepted an advantageous offer made me to be captain of the *Adventure*" (Swift 239). With careful study, the reader can learn many things from these opening lines: one, which Lemuel, the author and storyteller, is accounting in detail, the true accounts of his interactions with the Houyhnhnms. He shifts this book's genre to historical nonfiction or memoir, and even though the reader is aware that *Gulliver's Travels* is fictitious, this opening line shifts the perspective to one where Lemuel, the author, holds all the power. Popescu discusses this by saying, "the innocent reader is further ensnared by the fact that the author does not encourage any biographical interpretation, suggesting that Gulliver's adventures render their literal truth" (42). Lemuel pretends to leave interpretation in the hands of the reader, but because Gulliver is so obsessed with truth, the reader then believes that Lemuel's account is, in fact, real. Swift instantly manipulates his audience into believing and trusting Gulliver, an important application of ethos that extends throughout the book. From the first few lines, the reader also subconsciously learns of Swift's critique on the suppression of English family life. The reader, although sympathetic to Gulliver's truth, still observes his abandonment of his wife and children in exchange for money, fame, and domination through the *Adventure*. This line subconsciously sets the moral precedent between family and imperialism; Lemuel is prefacing

his narration with the implication that any evil events that occur in this story could exist because Gulliver chose to leave his family in pursuit of personal advancement, a critique of England's push towards imperialism. Here, Gulliver so easily leaves his wife to raise himself to a higher social class and independence, and it first may seem that Lemuel is disintegrating his lovable, sympathetic character; but by showing both the positive and negative actions of Gulliver, the character, Lemuel only further adds to his credibility. Swift shows the reader that Gulliver can do selfish or mean things—for he is human—but Lemuel is also not choosing to hide Gulliver's negative attributes. Because Lemuel transcribed Gulliver's good and bad actions, the reader is manipulated further into believing the objectiveness of Swift's story, and therefore, satire.

Once the narrative style of *Gulliver's Travels* was established, the reader is immediately informed of the partially unreliable nature of Gulliver. The name 'Lemuel' means 'for God' in Hebrew, implying that Gulliver is the moral guiding light, but Swift includes this piece of rhetorical irony to further his parallel to an everyman. Swift implies that the English, whose names and outward appearances all praise morality, are actually crooked, contemptuous, and confused. Swift's social critiques must be presented through clear, convincing rhetoric because his "satire's rhetorical strategy follows the principle that praise undeserved is scandal in disguise" (Real 111). He presents the irony of Gulliver's name in the very beginning of *Gulliver's Travels* so the reader understands that every immoral act committed by Gulliver counters his essence; Gulliver embodies a lie, and Lemuel, the author, is a master manipulator. Instead of embracing the Biblical teaching of humility and acceptance, Gulliver is sickened at the sight of those he considers lesser than himself. After he returns to England, Gulliver says, "my wife took me in her arms and kissed me, at which, having not been used to the touch of that odious animal for so many years, I fell in a swoon for almost an hour" (Swift 283). Gulliver is

completely absent of many Christian behaviors including compassion, acceptance, and faith, although he assumes that he possesses all moral qualities. Lemuel, the author, describes Gulliver as above other humans, which opposes the nature of his own name, his inscribed essence; he considers himself a human, but, in his mind, all other humans are Yahoos. In discussing the rhetoric of the Renaissance, critics have discovered that “poets and actors put on the masks of satyrs in order to teach moral manners and cultivated behavior” (Plett 170). Because Swift’s readers supposedly considered themselves both ‘moral’ and ‘cultivated,’ he included a complex narrator to show his audience that although they call themselves ‘for God,’ they are really just as cold as Gulliver who abhors his own family. This rhetorical strategy complements the narrative form of *Gulliver’s Travels* by pairing public and private selves. Gulliver states in his letters that he is opposed to publishing his work under the false pretense that Yahoos could not learn from it, meaning he wishes to keep his experiences private and controlled. The character, Gulliver, represents the reserved and morally astute side of Swift’s audience, but the author, Lemuel, represents the corrupt persona that is seen by the public. In *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, Hunter discusses how a common theme of 18th century literature was to separate the public and private realms so that they operate independently of each other, but, “Swift parodies [this] new form so incisively in the first-person narrative he attributes to Lemuel Gulliver. The literary and political interpenetrate” (41). The two-sided Gulliver does not have a distinction between public and private realms, and all negative aspects of his private self are revealed by Lemuel, the author. Swift applies this rhetorical strategy to expose the corruption behind the praise of the private realm. Immorality is present in all readers, and through this first-person narrative, Swift aims to expose the hidden lives of those who claim to be upright.

The reader is also intrigued by the counterintuitive habits of this unreliable narrator, perhaps spurring further contemplation. Because Gulliver writes in a journal type form and seems obsessed with ‘the truth,’ the reader is manipulated into sympathizing with this clearly delusional character. Hunter discusses this obscurity by saying, “[Gulliver] is very much an enigma if we take him seriously as a person— even a fictional person— for he does not operate in a lifelike, ‘realistic,’ or probable way. It is not just that he is mercurial, contradictory, and inconsistent, but that he seems to function in different ways at different moments of the book” (226). Gulliver elevates his own characteristics and then fails to act as a competent, rational individual when these characteristics are put to the test; for example, he continually distances himself from the reality that he is a Yahoo. When he returns home to England, Gulliver wishes to, “apply those excellent lessons of virtue which I learned among the Houyhnhnms, to instruct the Yahoos of my own family as far as I shall find them docible animals” (Swift 286-87). His family, who were, at the beginning of *Voyage Four*, simply an abandoned family, have transformed into savage beasts in Gulliver’s mind, while he still understands himself as a rational being who only appears to be a Yahoo. This similar appearance is enough to disgust Gulliver, but he attempts to distance himself as much as possible from the personification of human filth. Furthermore, in the “Letter from Captain Gulliver to His Cousin Sympson,” Gulliver proclaims his reluctance to publish this account and accuses his publishers of “[making him] say the thing that was not” (Swift 288). Gulliver principally believes that the Yahoos will not learn anything from his encounters, implying that because he wants to learn from the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver himself is not a Yahoo, but he also writes that he is greatly opposed to falsity of any sort. This inclusion only furthers the implication that Gulliver is a trustworthy narrator, as any of his inconsistencies could be the fault of the publisher or editor reviewing *Gulliver’s Travels*; but this

also makes the reader question Swift's intentions to create such an unreliable narrator and only contest it after the final chapter. This flexible and almost inhuman character "is pretty much whatever Swift wants him to be . . . [and] he is, in Swift's own terms, a 'personation' - someone who can put on different acts and faces at various moments when a particular stance of effect is needed" (Hunter 227). Hunter also mentions that only in *Voyage Four* does Gulliver seem to embody any plausible, human qualities, such as an initial attempt to rationalize the intellect of the Houyhnhnms. In all other books, his responses are completely separated from rational or normal human behaviors, but Gulliver simply blames his inconsistencies on a publisher. Swift uses this unreliable narrator who is obsessed with truth to show the dialect within a hypocritical, English society where individuals boast of their virtues and ignore their vices.

Along with the publisher, Swift also included internal conflict where Lemuel, the author, is undermining Gulliver, the character to make him appear unreliable. Popescu studied this concept and discovered that, "Gulliver's narrative bona fides . . . is systematically undermined by the writer, who grudges no pain in his attempt to persuade the reader of the protagonist's unreliable nature" (Popescu 44). It seems odd that Swift would create such a self-conflicting character, being both trustworthy and sympathetic and unreliable and manipulative. Lemuel works to subvert the essence of Gulliver, but Swift could have done this to warn his readers of the dangers of ignorance. Because his satire is aimed to critique 18th century England, it seems that he is advising his readers to not be blinded to the fact that they could, indeed, be in the wrong. Lemuel seems to be shaping the character of Gulliver into an individual that is unaware of his lack of morality, but only in the final letters does Swift allow his audience to see Gulliver, the character, resisting the narrative. Gulliver states that this book is, "a very loose and uncorrect account of my travels" which he, "[renounces] everything of [omission or insertion]" (Swift 287-

88). This divulges Swift's dichotomous universe where Lemuel is a master manipulator, and Gulliver's perceived morality is smudged. Through the double-sided character of Gulliver, the English audience was informed that, while they may believe they are honest, upright individuals, their behaviors or outward personas display unreliability and corruption. By creating such a complex character, it forces the audience to consider all aspects of Gulliver's attributes, both the good and bad, and only by manipulating his readers into this subconscious study of Gulliver could Swift be so successful in his critique.

Lemuel and Gulliver's identities seem to combine strangely at the end of *Voyage Four* when Gulliver verbally admits he is a Yahoo. When he met the Portuguese ship captain, Gulliver says, "I understood [Portuguese] very well and, getting upon my feet, said I was a poor Yahoo, banished from the Houyhnhnms" (Swift 280). This line has an interesting rhetorical weight because, at no other point, does Lemuel permit Gulliver to fully fulfill the parallel between himself and the disgusting Yahoos, and even this admission is steeped in paradox. Gulliver, who is a rational human, understands the complexities of a different language, walks on two legs, and is described here as the opposite of the dumb animals that walk on all-fours. This reluctant admission is both a display sorrow and an attempt at further mental distancing; because the reader empathizes with Gulliver, Swift uses this relationship to critique the English who pretend enslavement or racism is justified. Gulliver seems almost silly with his childish reluctance and feigned rejection of his own race, and this piece of rhetoric personifies the toxic imperialist mindset. Gulliver is a racist against the animals whom he knows share an identical resemblance to him. Previously, Lemuel allows his audience to suspect that Gulliver is a Yahoo by saying, "[he] could no longer deny that [he] was a real Yahoo in every limb and feature, since the females had a natural propensity to me as one of their own species" (Swift 268). Even at this

moment, Lemuel the author, tries to distance himself from reality, and “after Gulliver’s ‘mortifying’ realization (for the sake of the reader) that he can no longer deny he’s a yahoo, he abruptly changes the subject and begins an account of the manners and customs of the Houyhnhnms” (Robinson 184). The natural propensity of the female Yahoo mirrors Gulliver’s ‘natural propensity’ to distance himself from his supposed lesser beings. Gulliver denies his own reality, and because he is obsessed with truth, it seems that he is justified in the suppression of the Yahoos. Lemuel frames the narrative to expose Gulliver’s faults and inconsistencies, a strategy applied by Swift to reveal the inconsistencies of the imperialistic English who deny the reality and implications of a globally shared humanity.

England’s relationship with Ireland is Swift’s specific and satirical exposure of social discrepancy within character relations. Swift’s brutal rhetoric intensifies when recounting his interactions with the Yahoos in chapter one where Gulliver states, “I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable an animal or one against which I naturally conceived so strongly an antipathy” (Swift 241). As Gulliver is a representation of English society, he looks upon this new species as savage, grotesque, and foreign as an effort to distance himself from the supposed lower class of the Yahoos; however, soon after, Gulliver realizes the quite obvious similarities between himself and these creatures. Once it is noticed, Gulliver strongly opposes these affinities by saying, “my horror and astonishment are not to be described when I observed, in this abominable animal, a perfect human figure” (Swift 244). Lemuel, the author, chooses to reveal that he recognizes this other within himself and does everything he can to disassociate Gulliver from these beings who are naturally disgusting as a satirical critique of the English who participate in similar identity denials. Gulliver, the character, must have immediately noticed the similarities between himself and the Yahoos, but Lemuel chooses not to disclose this information

to frame Gulliver as a individual who cannot face reality. Swift built his universe to include brutal language, including a description of the Yahoos flinging excrement at Gulliver, as a convincing and empathetic swing at the audience. In this single, disgusting detail, Swift makes tangible his protests against the Yahoos and further manipulates his readers into pity for Gulliver who has experienced a horrible incident. Once this hatred is established, Gulliver, and perhaps the reader alike, feel guilty for appearing so similar. “[Swift’s] tracts periodically echo Gulliver’s revulsion of the ‘monstrous’ Yahoos through their depictions of the native Irish– ‘those animals’ that outwardly resemble their two-legged counterparts in England” (Hunter 67). This piece of rhetoric was meant to enhance the satirization of the disputes between the English and the Irish. Swift creates the Yahoos to embody, partially, England’s perception of the Irish, and through Gulliver’s realization, the reader is confronted with the similarities between the English and the Irish. The English are forced to recognize the disgraceful, savage aspects of their own identities, just as they observe in the Irish. Any aspect of the Yahoos disliked by Gulliver or the audience must be considered present in their own lives, for they are the same being; and by creating this empathetic character, Swift uses rhetoric to brutally destroy the reader’s perception of his or her identity in the hope that it is manipulated into moral equality.

Through characterization, the theme of Gulliver’s duality parallels the limitations of the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, who represent opposite ends of humanity’s rational capacity. Just as Gulliver’s dual nature created contrast, as both identities work for Swift to accomplish different ends, the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos represent so contrary that the ‘dominant’ race considers mass genocide because of their differences. This breed of intellect that Gulliver so desires blinds him to the, albeit limited, virtues of the Yahoos, and “in his love of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver accepts an idea of perfection which makes it impossible for him either to understand or to

participate in human life” (Nichols 1154). The rationality of the Houyhnhnms’ lifestyle does not allow for vice, but it also only produces limited virtues because they are incapable of moral emotions. Martin Price states in a footnote that Houyhnhnms “have no conception of anything supernatural or of a deity other than Nature itself, nor do they have any experience of a ‘fallen’ Nature (except in the Yahoos)” (248n3). By creating these characters that are so extremely polarized into rational thought, Swift intentionally excluded their capacity to experience virtue as a critique of the 18th century English society. During the Renaissance era, a push towards logic and rational behavior swept through the minds of the English, but by extremifying the rationale so coveted by individuals, Swift explored the dangers of abandoning moral capacities. Just like the Houyhnhnms, readers who totally pursue logic surrender their ability to empathize with others, love, or, as mentioned by Price, submit to a heavenly authority. Swift also creates these factual beings with other negative qualities; “Swift presents [the Houyhnhnms] as unenlightened and self-deceived. The intelligent horses deny that they are engaged in rhetorical matters because they view language solely as a means ‘to receive Information of Facts.’ However, their ‘old Debate’ about the nature of their savage counterparts, the Yahoos, demonstrates that the horses suffer from a lack of self-awareness” (Skouen and Stark 93). Not only does the duality of Gulliver blind him, but Swift also makes the Houyhnhnms, the perceived master race, unaware and biased. When Gulliver accompanies the Houyhnhnms to the grand assembly, the Houyhnhnms restart the debate of whether or not to destroy all the Yahoos, which contrasts their ascribed use of language (Swift 278). Not only does Swift include this detail to show his readers the dangers of a loss of empathy, but also to show that a pursuit of an entirely logical lifestyle is impossible and damaging, one that Bernard Harrison titles ‘modern Totalitarianism’ (Yi 173). The Houyhnhnms had previously stated that rhetoric did not exist in their universe because they

had no need for any language other than facts, but in this ironic twist, Swift uses rhetoric to satirize this lifestyle. While Swift generally critiques broad morality, the creation of an unaware master race brought a specific satirical critique on the literary stance of the Royal Society. They pushed for plain style and the “[rejection] of all amplifications, digressions and swelling of style: to return back to the primitive purity and shortness” (Sprat 113). Along with this push towards plain, logical language, they also regarded fact as much greater than wit and spread these concepts throughout England. As the Royal Society represents logic, the unaware and self-deceived Houyhnhnms’ extremified embodiment critique the Royal Society’s foundation through carefully explored rhetoric. Swift uses the dichotomy within the Houyhnhnms’ essence as a rhetorical application of satire critiquing England’s push toward absolute logic.

The social barriers constructed by Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms only show their social blindness, vice, and racism, a rhetorical strategy Swift included in his universe to expose the imperious spirit of the English. Just as Lemuel’s writing protects Gulliver from brutal reality, the Yahoos’ outward appearance shields Gulliver from seeing their positive attributes, and by downplaying the physical similarities of Yahoos and humans, Gulliver and Lemuel, “[form] a new ‘Chain of Being,’ in which all creatures are distinguished not by their non-transferrable physical traits but by the distance that each creature has from ‘Virtue and Reason’” (Yi 170). With this understanding, Gulliver blinds himself to the faults of the Houyhnhnms and virtues of the Yahoos for whom he has a natural distaste for. In fact, the Yahoos seem to be the only beings that are fully aware of their social abilities; they recognize Gulliver as a Yahoo because he looks very similar, and the female Yahoo even attempts to mate with him (Swift 268). Conversely, the Houyhnhnms refuse to accept their counterparts—the asses. The asses look very similar to the Houyhnhnms, only lacking a complex rationale, but the Houyhnhnms use asses as a source of

food and erect a mental barrier to protect their fragile identities. Swift creates this unaware universe to critique those in English society who enslave others of their own kind, and England's imperialism as a whole. Elaine Robinson, who studied the dynamic of racism between a white Gulliver and the black Yahoos, discovered that "Gulliver persists in denying that his master's African slaves are of the same species as white people," and he only pretended to 'discover' the grotesque nature of traditional black stereotypes in Yahoos (182). These character flaws are intentionally included by Lemuel to further Swift's rhetoric of false-praise. Regardless of Gulliver's attachment to the Houyhnhnms, the reader is aware that both Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms have noticeable moral faults. If the English claim to be morally astute, then they must recognize the vices imbedded in the essence of Swift's universe, and he uses this to combat the reader's identity ignorance.

While the master race portrays subtle faults, the Yahoos represent the opposite spectrum of humanity whose faults are more clearly visible to the public eye. Swift includes positive characteristics of even the lowest beings to suggest humility and forgiveness to the English who may appear morally inept. In addition to being the only self-aware race, the Yahoos are also capable of love and are the only characters to display relatable, human qualities. Swift writes, "that the Yahoos were the only animals in this country subject to any diseases" (265) and "there are certain shining stones of several colours, whereof the Yahoos are violently fond" (264). The Yahoos do, indeed, display brutish qualities, but unlike the Houyhnhnms, they have interests, desires, extraordinary love, and human qualities. Lemuel mentions that Yahoos are the only creatures to get sick because he wants the readers to recognize that, while Yahoos are mostly gross, they display identical human struggles. The Houyhnhnms have a logical and shallow appreciation for their mates, where "the married pair pass their lives with the same friendship

and mutual benevolence, that they bear to all others of the same species” (Swift 270), but demonstrated by the female Yahoo’s natural propensity towards Gulliver, it is clear that Yahoos are capable of a higher passion than Houyhnhnms. The Yahoos’ characteristics are significantly more human-like than the Houyhnhnms, which Swift used to parallel Yahoos to those English individuals who display brutish characteristics. “This common humanity, a Yahoo humanity, is one which Swift also recognizes, and asserts with a comparable intensity of awareness” (Rawson 106). In fact, Swift uses the introduction on an educated and gentle Yahoo to suggest that the Houyhnhnms crafted the identities of the Yahoos into lesser beings. Keeseey writes, “that Yahoos are ‘essentially’ human beings who have reached their debased, animalistic condition because they are treated like animals by their cold and cruel ‘slavemasters,’ the Houyhnhnms” (321). As the Yahoos represent an extremified Irish population, Gulliver’s disruption of the caste system is Swift’s personification of England’s imperialistic and entitled attitude towards the Irish that caused them to appear animalistic. Swift included the Yahoo’s parallel to humanity to demolish the walls of race and class within England’s ignorant, imperialistic government.

Swift used several rhetorical strategies in his world-building to manipulate the reader into sympathizing with his characters and class dynamic. The dialect between Swift, Lemuel, and Gulliver work specifically to bring different ends: Swift builds the morally complex universe unpacked and satirized by Lemuel while Gulliver experiences an unbiased series of events. Once this sympathy has been established, the reader is much more receptive to the satirical ends applied by Lemuel, and this dynamic made *Gulliver’s Travels Voyage Four* so popular among the culture it is satirizing. By creating a narrative that is easily understood, Lemuel’s satire is fairly understandable for the average reader; however, with Swift’s allusion to additional study, these readers can explore the dichotomy that he expands into a much more in-depth critique.

Playing on the supposed moral identity of his readers, Swift tore down their preconceived ideas about the function of imperialism and holiness within their contemporary society, and by focusing on specific critiques such as the Royal Society and Irish imperialism, he furthered his rhetorical success. The combination of his unusual, empathetic rhetoric and an obviously flawed class system transformed Gulliver's ideal Houyhnhnmland into one of moral ambiguity and ignorant identities, and by exposing these subtle details, Swift created one of the most successful rhetorical applications of all time.

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