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Gulliver's Travels

Jonathan Swift · *1726 · original English text*

A ship's surgeon comes home from four strange countries less proud of England, and of himself, than when he left. Swift's satire is comic in Lilliput and terrible among the Houyhnhnms, and it keeps asking whether reason, rank and national glory are as solid as they look when seen from the wrong height.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If human pride could see itself to scale, what would remain of its boasts?

"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."

King of Brobdingnag · Part II, Chapter VI

The Brobdingnagian king says aloud what the other voyages enact. Lilliput's egg-war makes statecraft look small; Laputa's projectors make learning vain; the Houyhnhnms hold up a reason so cold it almost unmakes pity. The book is a mirror, not a travel tip: pride is the disease it means to treat.

KEY CHARACTERS

Lemuel Gulliver
surgeon-narrator; pride under revision

The Emperor of Lilliput
tiny majesty, large policy

The King of Brobdingnag
moral common sense at a great height

The Houyhnhnms
reason without Christian charity

The Yahoos
appetite and malice without culture

The Portuguese captain
ordinary kindness, hard to receive

Grades 9–12

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01

Lilliput

PART I, CHAPTERS I–IV

A giant among toy courtiers, already useful and already trapped.

- Gulliver is wrecked and finds himself bound by a people six inches high
- He learns the language, is fed at huge cost, and is both a marvel and a weapon
- Court factions divide over the height of heels; a greater schism divides egg-breakers
- He is drawn into the empire's quarrel with Blefuscu

02

The Convenient End

PART I, CHAPTERS V–VIII

A war of conscience and pride, fought over an egg.

- The old doctrine is that all true believers break their eggs at the convenient end; no one agrees which end that is
- Gulliver seizes the Blefuscudian fleet and then refuses to enslave the defeated
- He falls from favor, flees to Blefuscu, and at last gets home
- The comedy is already an anatomy of party, war and gratitude

> *"that all true believers break their eggs at the convenient end"*
>
> **Gulliver, on the Lilliputian doctrine** · Part I, Chapter IV

03

Brobdingnag

PART II

The scale reverses; England is examined through a giant's eyes.

- Gulliver is now a tiny curiosity in a land of giants, kept like a pet and a show
- He tries to impress the king with English government, law, credit and gunnery
- The king, after many questions, delivers his verdict on the "odious vermin"
- Gulliver is rescued by a bird and a passing ship, still wounded in his pride

> *"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."*
>
> **King of Brobdingnag** · Part II, Chapter VI

04

Laputa and After

PART III

Learning unmoored from use, and a hunger for endless life.

- The flying island of Laputa is full of speculative mathematicians who cannot tailor a coat
- The Academy of Lagado wastes labor on ridiculous projects
- In Luggnagg he meets the Struldbrugs, who live forever and make immortality look like a curse
- The voyage mocks vain knowledge and the wish to escape the human term

05

The Houyhnhnms

PART IV, CHAPTERS I–X

Reason without mercy, and men seen as Yahoos.

- Gulliver is abandoned in a land where horses—the Houyhnhnms—rule, and filthy Yahoos resemble men
- He comes to admire the horses' calm reason and to loathe his own likeness in the Yahoos
- He tells them of European war, law and money; they can hardly believe it
- The assembly orders his departure: he is, after all, a kind of Yahoo

06

A Difficult Homecoming

PART IV, CHAPTERS XI–XII

The mirror is still in his hand when he reaches England.

- He is rescued by a Portuguese captain whose kindness he can barely accept
- At home he shrinks from his family as from Yahoos, and prefers the stable
- The last pages warn the reader against pride even in reading satire
- The travel tale ends as a spiritual crisis: contempt can become a new form of pride

Pride · Scale & Judgment · Folly of Parties · Vain Learning · Reason & Mercy · Homecoming

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The Lilliputian egg-war is comic until you notice how much blood Swift says it has cost. What real quarrels is he scaling down?
2. In Brobdingnag Gulliver tries to boast of gunpowder. Why does the king's refusal matter as much as his "vermin" sentence?
3. The Struldbrugs punish the wish to live forever. What does Swift think we are forgetting when we want more time without more holiness?
4. The Houyhnhnms are admirable and chilling. Where does their reason fall short of justice or of love?
5. Gulliver's last disgust at his own family is not held up as wisdom. How can satire of pride end by feeding a new pride?
6. Keep the narrator at arm's length. Gulliver is not always Swift, and Swift is not always joking.

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