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Research Question: To what extent is Lemuel Gulliver in *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift a reflection of the writer with regard to political and religious views, and attitudes toward women and the concept of family?

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Abstract

This extended essay is an examination of the extent to which the protagonist Lemuel Gulliver in *Gulliver's Travels* is a reflection of Jonathan Swift. It involves the exploration of this research question in terms of politics, religion, attitude to women and family; with references to this piece of literature and some secondary resources when necessary. The quotations from published literary criticism are either refuted by examples from the novel or supported in the light of evidence from the novel. Other secondary resources include Swift's two other prose works, *The Modest Proposal* and *A Letter to a Very Young Lady on Her Marriage*, which are referred to briefly for clarification of the evidence. The purpose of this study is to analyse in what ways and to what extent the protagonist is an author-surrogate in the abovementioned ways.

This essay is comprised of two sections, namely "politics and religion" and "women and family", each focusing on a particular aspect of the investigation. In the first section, Swift's political and religious standpoint is discussed extensively in order to correctly evaluate Gulliver's paradigm. By making connections between the beliefs of the author and those of Gulliver, the relation between the two is established to support the claim of this essay. In the second section, the female figures in the novel and Gulliver's perception of them are inspected. The plot is also taken into consideration in this part of the inquiry although the central focus is on the persona.

In the conclusion, it is validated that Gulliver is a reflection of Jonathan Swift with regard to political and religious vision, and attitude towards women and family, by juxtaposing and assembling the main elements of personification of Gulliver and Jonathan Swift's personal ideas and experiences.

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I. Introduction

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift is widely regarded among the most remarkable satirical allegories in world literature. In writing this literary piece, Swift took some creative license with facts in order to enable a context that is aimed substantially at political and social institutions of the time. Thereupon, every one of Gulliver's destinations displays a characteristic feature, through which the writer underscores the ludicrous features of European and British nations. To communicate the authorial intention, numerous allusions and other literary elements are employed abundantly by the author.

While a great number of literary critics agree on the conceptual references in this piece of literature, very few have discussed the extent to which Gulliver is the literary embodiment of Swift.¹ The traces of the final draft of *Gulliver's Travels* can be found in the sketches produced by the author in the company of an intimate friend Alexander Pope at the Martinus Scriblerus Literary Club. As a matter of fact, the novel was devised to be a revised composition of these incomplete essays and pamphlets. However, the pieces were assembled in such a way to conceal the identity of the author to prevent his reputation from influencing the audience. For this purpose, *Gulliver's Travels* was then written in a form similar to that of a travelogue and was published under the pseudonym of Lemuel Gulliver. Despite Swift's efforts to maintain the suspense that the publication contrived, the genuine writer was soon discovered for "Gulliver" exposed to the readers an individual that they are surprisingly familiar with: Jonathan Swift.

In approaching the relationship between the main character and the author, it is critical to evaluate the nature of Gulliver in the writing, both as an observer and a narrator. From the conventional perspective, he appears to be an amusing rhetorical character crafted as a device

¹ "Travels into several remote nation of the World by Lemuel Gulliver." *Glasgow University Library – Book of the Month*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Nov. 2012. <<http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/month/jan2006.html>>

for the writer to ridicule false intelligence. This aspect of the persona is demonstrated by several instances throughout the novel, such as his attempt to explain the name “Laputa” in etymological terms, ignorant of its true meaning in Spanish though he claims otherwise. In this sense, he can be envisaged as a caricature of the “middle-class British explorer” from Swift’s viewpoint. To put it in other words, he is armed with stereotypical manners and reasoning, and lacks idiosyncratic traits, which implies that the protagonist is only an integral part of satire in the book. Though Gulliver may be interpreted as a flat character for aforementioned reasons, when scrutinised carefully, a correspondence between the paradigm of the author and his hero is realised. From this correlation arises the need to explore the protagonist in the light of the author’s outlook on certain issues. Thus, *Gulliver’s Travels* represents a brilliant example of self-insertion with the presence of an “author surrogate” as the narrator and the observer.

The scope of this essay will therefore be the extent to which Lemuel Gulliver is a reflection of Jonathan Swift himself with regard to political and religious views as well as attitude towards women and the concept of family.

II A. Politics and Religion

It is argued that literature in the eighteenth century could not be separated from the political conflicts of the time and that literary works were very frequently used as instruments of propaganda. As a result of these piercing conditions, literature witnessed many political battles in this era and the demand for a literary weapon in these battles augmented the importance of satire as a genre. Having blossomed under such circumstances, *Gulliver’s Travels* is heavily loaded with chiefly political and religious attributes, most of which are distinctive to Swift’s very own convictions.

George Orwell denotes Swift's determination to satirize British and European communities in terms of their customs and relations with one another to be "simply an attack on England, on the dominant Whig Party, and on the war with France"². On some part, Orwell's claim is partly verified with the consistent pattern in narration and characterisation that is followed by the use of language and the gloomy tone. On the other hand, however, the pattern is sometimes distorted when the reflections of the writer's personal life start to dominate the content and the narrative tends to autobiography, hence hinting to a relation between the author and his self-insertion character on a more personal level. Therefore, it can be inferred that Swift's ideas and past experiences are subtly and cleverly conveyed in the arms of Gulliver.

As outlined by David Oakleaf, Swift's life as a writer echoes three main aspects, first regarding his political loyalties, first to the Whigs and then to the Tories; second as a native Irishman, and last as a clergyman serving the Church. All of these three dimensions are blended in *Gulliver's Travels* to varying degrees.³

To mirror these aspects, Swift persistently utilises a literary motif, Gulliver's spectacles, which is of particular significance in the examination of politics and religion in the novel. Keeping in mind that Gulliver is both the narrator and the observer, it becomes evident that his spectacles operate as a medium that not only communicates his impressions, but also does it straight from Gulliver's viewpoint: whatever Gulliver experiences, the audience is reported to from his spectacles. Ultimately, the spectacles of the protagonist are used to construct a bridge between the writer and the audience, and reflect Swift himself in the character he

² Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda: Critical Essays*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2008. Print.

³ Oakleaf, David. "Politics and History." *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*. Christopher Fox. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

brings into existence. For this reason, one should give importance to the attitude that lies in Gulliver's speeches along with his actions.

The historical background of the novel is prerequisite to understanding Swift's position. The Whigs and Tories have been struggling for dominance since 1679, after the Exclusion crisis that rose in England, which was essentially a state of nationwide frenzy⁴; the society was shaken by a fear that the King Charles II of England would be substituted by his Roman Catholic brother, the Duke of York, since he did not have a heir to pass his throne onto, causing compelling arguments among them. The ideologies of those politically labelled as Whigs and Tories have somewhat altered since its first use; however, their existence as politically influential authorities persisted. The first being in favour of Exclusion and the latter opposing to it, a factional division among the elite that is to last for about two centuries was created. The conflict between these two political parties led to heating arguments concerning education, religious regulations, administration of certain institutions and economics; and this major conflict in England was studied in *Gulliver's Travels*.

The discourse of the Emperor of Lilliput saying "two struggling parties in this empire, under the names of Tramecksan and Slamecksan, from the high and low heels of their shoes, by which they distinguish themselves"⁵ exposes the actual political conditions in England at the time under the drifting but fierce reign of liberal Whigs and conservative Tories. As well as other writers at his time, Swift participated in the literary battle of the-Eighteenth-Century-England; in Book I, the absurdity of political and religious disagreements between England and France, as well as Whigs and Tories, is demonstrated by the issue upon which the Lilliputians and Blefuscuans diverge, that is, the proper way to crack an egg. The vague

⁴ Seager, Nicholas. "Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis." *Literary Encyclopedia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 July 2011. <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true>>.

⁵ Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. London: Collins Classics, 2010. Print.

declaration that “all the true believers shall break their eggs at the convenient end”⁶ is made by Lilliputians, with regard to alleged scriptures and declarations. Similar to Gulliver who finds himself in the middle of rival fanatics, Swift was driven by necessity to take sides. However, much like the Emperor’s son with “one of his heels higher than the other which gives him a hobble in his gait,”⁷ Swift had some political uncertainties, thus allied with both Whigs and Tories at different times in his lifetime. Orwell observes that Swift “often descends into a political partisanship of a narrow kind”⁸ in Parts I and III. Despite being labelled as a Tory at the time, Swift's standpoint in *Gulliver’s Travels* slightly differs from that of a Tory propagandist, and is considered to still be faithful to the principles that the Old Whiggism by Arthur E. Case. As seen in the novel, the ideal world Swift sets in his mind is that of continuity and permanence, and so Gulliver is an overall static character. He seems to possess solid views in many aspects of community life, and declares them using every opportunity. His illustration of the destinations of his voyages are followed by his comments that are made, sometimes naively, but always reliantly, which displays parallelism with Swift's response to life.

The political view Swift holds in the novel revolves around the interactions of the king, the nobles and the commons each of whom he acknowledged to be equally essential to the well-being of the state. Fundamentally, the king was responsible for maintaining the equilibrium between the three and thus harmony. Although the countries that Gulliver visits during his voyages are ruled by monarchy, a sort of just organization and a connection is established between social classes, with the exception of the unique case of the Yahoos. The qualities of these utopic lands clash with the practice in Ireland and England, but reflect Swift’s yearning for such legal and social institutions along with a governing class that is responsible for and is

⁶ Swift, pg. 35

⁷ Swift, pg. 35

⁸ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda: Critical Essays*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2008. Print.

concerned with people of all classes; which Orwell also asserts that are establishments that Swift would be pleased to see prevailing in Ireland. Swift's Irish perspective on English politics also accounts for this particular feature of *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver's awareness of the fact that "Poor Nations are hungry, and rich Nations are proud; and Pride and Hunger will ever be at Variance"⁹ can thus be regarded as a reference to the prosperous and exploiting England and Ireland that suffers from famine and poverty.

In his report of Brobdingnag's metropolis Lorbrulgrud in Part II, the author makes particular mention of the beggars about the city. The variation of the tone from submissive to condescending may be mistaken for the disgust that the Yahoos incite in Gulliver bearing in mind the fact that the description of both creatures focuses on their "hideousness". On the other hand, when examined closely, it is confirmed that Swift's actual view of the beggars is very dissimilar to his view of the Yahoos. The scene sketched in this passage resembles greatly to that in one of Swift's pamphlets, *A Modest Proposal*. A crowd similar to the group of beggars in this passage referred to as "the most horrible spectacle ever a European eye beheld"¹⁰ is epitomised as "beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms"¹¹ in *A Modest Proposal*. In conclusion, Swift does not intend to patronize a social class, but criticize the impoverishment of Ireland, imitating the Dublin beggars.

In spite of his position as a dean in the Church, Swift's religious beliefs did not apply to the status quo in the Eighteenth-Century-England. His literary works did not often handle, or mention at all, any major religious figures. A chapter in *Gulliver's Travels* is governed by

⁹ Swift, pg. 263

¹⁰ Swift, pg. 215

¹¹ Swift, Jonathan. "A Modest Proposal." 1729. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*. Ed. Geoffrey Sauer. The English Server. U of Washington. 20 September 2012 <<http://eserver.org/18th/swiftmodest.txt>>.

Gulliver's, and Swift's, adoration of six historical figures such as Brutus and Socrates, only one of whom is a Christian. Furthermore, the notion of afterlife is regarded as absurd among the Houyhnhnms, Swift's ideal beings, and after a while Gulliver concludes that the rational and appropriate response to death is not grief but embrace. This is a trace of Swift's misanthropy and lack of faith conveyed through Gulliver, and was also expressed in a letter by John Gay on 17 November 1726 upon his observations, after the publication of the novel that certain religious and influential ladies speculate that such an attitude towards spiritual matters is an insult on belief and depreciation of life as well as the God-made creatures.¹² Gulliver is a rebellious character in a novel written for fundamentally revolutionary reasons. Regarding the aspects that are discussed in this chapter, it can be determined that Swift reflects himself, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in the character that he creates in *Gulliver's Travels*.

II. Women and Family

The impact of women on Swift's early life was a distressing one, and was later expressed in the shape of literary figures in his work, which reached its climax in *Gulliver's Travels* with mockery of women, especially as mothers and wives. Women in the novel are treated in a distinctive manner, and although there is not a forthright and independent attack on women, several instances of gender discrimination occur throughout the novel. Women from Gulliver's spectacles and women in Swift's own life disclose a surprising degree of parallelism, which also offers insight for the interpretation of the position and function of women in *Gulliver's Travels*. Aside from the feminine and authoritative aspect of Swift's women, his assumptions about the concept of family are also implied.

¹² Williams, Kathleen, ed. *The Critical Heritage: Jonathan Swift*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2002.

During the era in which Jonathan Swift lived, the institution of marriage was perceived as the combination of forces as a consequence of the industrialised and competitive world that made such mutualism crucial.¹³ Contrary to the former business partnerships formed among the members of a family, the all-male professions that rose thereafter did not allow women to take part in business. Thus, women, who were deprived of the tasks they would perform at home due to increased use of machinery and higher standard of life, began to decline in position in the society. It was not uncommon that the man would leave home for temporary jobs, and the “joint territory” called home would become exclusive to the woman. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Gulliver is the archetypal “labouring man”, and his mobility furnishes him with a feeling of superiority over his wife. Mary Burton makes little objection to his decisions, and when she does, she is ignored by Gulliver for this reason.

Being a posthumous child, Swift lacked a parental figure during his childhood for which he longed in a significant number of his work.¹⁴ While introducing the protagonist at the beginning of the novel, Swift visualises a “father figure” by whose “assistance” Gulliver acquires the sum that is mandatory for his long voyages. As opposed to the paternal image in the passage, in his autobiography he emphasises the fact that his family sunk into poverty after his father's death, since Swift's mother Abigail had brought little fortune with her marriage to him.

Swift’s mother, the first of all female figures, who fraught his life with rage, aghast and rejection, was a reserved but controlling woman with a design to interfere with his life but did not appear to need him and thus the natural cause for Swift’s reactionary attitude towards all women. From this point can it be inferred that the spiteful attitude toward the female gender

¹³ Brown, Julia Prewitt. *A Reader's Guide to the Nineteenth Century English Novel*. New York: Macmillan, 1985. Print.

¹⁴ Doody, Margaret Anne. “Politics and History.” *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*. Christopher Fox. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

is nurtured by Swift's past relationships. Gulliver suggests that women should receive the education men do, but for other purposes than them. As observed by Gulliver in Lilliputian nurseries for young girls, this function is to be better companions to their husbands, and in the Houyhnhnms, better mothers. This distinction demonstrates the fact that Gulliver, likewise with Swift, does not regard women as independent individuals who are allowed to achieve self-actualization, but as a part of a community who serve a shared function.

Furthermore, in the introductory chapter of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver gives a brief account of his life and marriage where he shows no affection for his wife. Instead, he refers to his marrying to Mrs Mary Burton, "second daughter to Mr Edmut Burton, hosier in Newgate Street, with whom I received four hundred pounds for a portion"¹⁵ with no sign of actual attraction. His indifference is repeatedly implied in various passages. He often leaves home for adventurous voyages, and as a matter of fact, before leaving for Laputa, it becomes evident that Gulliver intends to be far from his wife as well as his children. Neither does he heed her words when she "protests he should never go to sea any more" as "although his evil destiny so ordered, that she had not power to hinder him"¹⁶. Hence, marriage for Gulliver is not an exchange of emotions and support based on reciprocal understanding and mutuality but an established social institution where man and woman are assigned their distinctive but unequal duties. Gulliver, though already having had a dysfunctional relationship with his wife before his voyages, after his return home from the voyage to the Houyhnhnmland, seems not to be able to relate to his wife anymore at all, and is, in fact, repelled by her presence as is apparent in the passage where "...my wife took me in her arms, and kissed me; at which,

¹⁵ Swift, pg. 4

¹⁶ Swift, pg. 67

having not been used to the touch of that odious animal for so many years, I fell in a swoon for almost an hour.”¹⁷

According to Doody, Swift, too, explicitly detests the notion of marriage but could not function without women in the society. The dilemma that arises from Swift’s personal life is also apparent in that of Gulliver: he has confused feelings about his marriage, shuttling between love and disgust; urges women to educate themselves, but insists they can never acquire the intellect they need to be compatible with their husbands, as in *Letter to a Very Young Lady upon Her Marriage*.

Chiefly, the “undeniable” inferiority of women to men is emphasized through repetitive cases. Firstly, women of Balnibarbi are taxed depending on their beauty and demeanour, their only virtues, unlike men. Secondly, Gulliver’s caretaker in Brobdingnag, Glumdalclich, receives great sympathy from Gulliver; nonetheless still occasionally disturbs him by her youthful femininity. Last but not least, the Yahoo women are depicted to be driven by their primitive urges, and are despised by Swift, who values reason and manners as the ultimate virtues of an ideal human being as opposed to emotional and sensual drives. His disgust is partly kindled by the fact that he was dismissed from the Houyhnhnmland due to his resemblance to the Yahoos, who are much like humans in physique and comportment, and yet this disappointment evidently does not underlie Gulliver’s misogynous attitude. Even at his first encounter with the Yahoos he is fairly irritated by the exposure of their bare skin, and makes bigoted remarks on the female body at various points of the novel. When faced with a female giant of Brobdingnag, compared to whom he is of extremely small stature, he confesses “no object ever disgusted me as much as the sight of her monstrous breast” as the numerous flaws of the female body in Gulliver’s mind are magnified at close contact with an aggrandized

¹⁷ Swift, pg. 285

physical human form. These cases indicate Swift's irritation by the naiveté and insignificant concerns of the coquette, and the female sexuality. Aside from all these incidents, the passage below evinces the attitude towards women:

“Several of the emperor's court, making their way through the crowd, entreated me to come immediately to the palace, where her imperial majesty's apartment was on fire, by the carelessness of a maid of honour, who fell asleep, while she was reading a romance.”¹⁸

The indifference behind the fire that destroyed the Lilliputian royal palace is again associated with the carelessness of women, who are too absorbed in their own affairs. As in this passage, the writer places the satirical focus is on the feminine elements in the novel, especially their failure to be self-sufficient and clumsiness, with his lexical choice. Given that Swift had multiple conflicts with his own over controlling and authoritative mother, it becomes clear that the image of mother in *Gulliver's Travels* is associated with the authority and manipulation. The response and objection of the Empress of Lilliput to Gulliver's vulgar act of public urination, regardless of his aim, and his subsequent leave, is the first instance of female authority. This instance, as Orwell claims, is also an attack on Queen Anne's destructive response to *A Tale of a Tub*, by which she was fairly offended, while Swift “probably felt he had done a great service to the English crown”. The narrator's belittling attitude is likewise revealed in one of Swift's letters *Letter to a Very Young Lady upon Her Marriage*:

“...therefore it shall be my care to direct you better, a task for which I take myself to be not ill qualified; because I have spent more time, and have had more opportunities than many others to observe and discover, from what sources follies of women are derived.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Swift, pg.50

¹⁹ Swift, Jonathan. *The Works of Jonathan Swift*. New York: General Books LLC 2010. Google Book Search. Web. 21 July 2011.

Gulliver's misanthropic tendencies, which are fathered on to him by Swift, often turn into overt misogyny when faced with a group of women. Descriptive passages that delineate women display two contradictory sides; in every remote nation he visits Gulliver describes men and women separately, by focusing on their different features. The women of Lilliput are clumsy and careless; the women of Brobdingnag bossy and controlling; nevertheless, the women of Houyhnhnmland are not necessarily different from their males for they are the utopic representatives of reason. By juxtaposing the male and the female, Swift imposes his prejudiced opinions about the "female species" on the reader through Gulliver. After extensively explaining the characteristic features of a nation, including their political, social and cultural backgrounds, Gulliver specifically makes remarks on their women. The image illustrated by descriptions varies greatly from nation to nation; however, the women remain somewhat the same, as does Swift's outlook on them.

III. Conclusion

In this study, two central aspects of Jonathan Swift's reflection on Gulliver of *Gulliver's Travels* have been discussed. Politics in the eighteenth century could not be expounded without a religious standpoint accurately for the two were closely bound to one another, and thus, it was observed that the writer's political and religious status are imposed on the main character as a whole. In a similar manner, treatment of women and the notion of marriage could not be possible for the author without personal bias. To conclude, in spite of the fact that, much like his contemporaries, Swift's intention in writing was derived from propaganda purposes; another layer of meaning was added to his writing, particularly in the subject of this essay, with his intruding into the narrative as Gulliver.

First and foremost, Swift's political and religious loyalties, as well as uncertainties, were embedded in the persona of Gulliver. Whilst this was occasionally done visibly by the

insertion of his beliefs into Gulliver's discourse or actions, mostly it was Gulliver's spectacles that the author utilises to illustrate the reality in a subjective fashion.

In contrast to his dynamic qualities, Gulliver's approach to women does not significantly evolve throughout the novel, indicating an external impulse. This is explained by the parallelism between the author and the character demonstrated by various examples from the book with reference to the author's other prose to better clarify his mentality.

By the investigation of the research question, it was made apparent that the novel is in one way a retrospective account of Swift's life and that Gulliver is an author-surrogate by focusing on the items restated above. As is suggested by this essay, it may sometimes be convenient to read into a text considering the relation of its subtext to the author because the meaning is then enhanced with the newly discovered links. On the other hand, one should never found their interpretation of a text solely on its contextual framework for this would deteriorate the essence of fiction.

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