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Elements of Children Literature in Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels

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Abstract

Swift's Gulliver's Travels is an intense adventurous and fantasy novel that engages audience of all ages. It is a Neo-Classical classic. The novel can at once function as a satire and a fantasy entertainer. The novel also encompasses various elements of Children Literature. Swift caters to the curiosity and imagination of the children with his far-fetched and make-believe writing techniques. This essay reads the novel as an indispensable contribution to Children's Literature and maps the elements of Children's Literature in the novel. Key Words: Gulliver's Travel, Swift, Lilliput, Children, Fantasy, Adventure

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), an Anglo-Irish essayist, novelist and satirist is famous for his works like Gulliver's Travels and A Tale of a Tub. Gulliver's Travels is considered as a masterpiece comprising four parts. Gulliver's Travels revolves around its protagonist Gulliver and reveals an account of his voyages around several islands and elucidates how he explores the culture and livelihood of the inhabitants of the islands. This novel belongs to the Neo-Classical Age. It satirizes the political governance of England during

the Neo-Classical period. Children's literature can be broadly defined as written works with fantasy and adventurous depictions accompanied with illustrations. This genre encompasses a wide range of literary works produced in order to entertain or instruct children. Pictures, books and short stories were written exclusively for children.

Gulliver's Travels is perhaps most frequently encountered today in adaptations for film, stage or television, many of which are aimed towards children. It strives to be moralistic and lacks Swift's satirical tone. Gulliver's Travels was published in the year 1726. The book is written in first person point of view of the protagonist. In the first part, Gulliver faces a shipwreck and he is the only survivor of the ship wreck and he swims to Lilliput, where he is tied up by the people who are less than six inches tall. He is then taken to the capital city then released. He is amazed by the Lilliputian's small size mirrors, their small-mindedness and how they indulge in ridiculous customs and petty debates.

Gulliver is asked to help defend Lilliput against Blefuscu, with which Lilliput is at war over which end of an egg should be broken first, this being a matter of religious doctrine. Gulliver captures Blefuscu's naval fleet, thus preventing an invasion but decides to assist the emperor of Lilliput in conquering Blefuscu. Later, Gulliver extinguishes a fire in the palace by urinating on it. Eventually he falls out of favor and he is sentenced to be blinded and starved. He flees to Blefuscu, where he finds a normal-size boat and thus able to return to England.

Gulliver's second voyage takes him to Brobdingnag, inhabited by a race of giants. A farm worker finds Gulliver and delivers him to the farm owner. They begin exhibiting Gulliver for money and farmer's daughter takes care of him. One day the queen orders the farmer to bring Gulliver and she purchases him. He becomes a favorite at court, though the king reacts with contempt when Gulliver recounts the splendid achievements of his own civ-

ilization. Gulliver offers to make gunpowder and canon for the king, but the King is horrified by the thought of such weaponry. Eventually Gulliver is picked up by an eagle and rescued at sea by the people of his own size.

On Gulliver's third voyage, he is set adrift by pirates and eventually ends up on the flying island of Laputa. The people of Laputa have one eye pointing inward and the other upward. They are so lost in thought, they must be reminded to pay attention to the world around them. Though they are greatly concerned with mathematics and music, they have no practical applications for their learning. Laputa is the home of the king of Balnibarbi the continent below it, Gulliver finds the farm fields in ruin. Gulliver's host explains that the inhabitants follow the prescriptions of a learned academy in the city, where the scientists undertake such impractical projects such as extracting sunbeams from cucumbers. Later, Gulliver visits Glubbudrib, the island of sorceries, and there he speaks with great men of the past and learns from them, the lies of history. In the kingdom of Luggnagg, he meets the struldbrugs, who are immortal but aged as though they were mortal and are thus miserable. From Luggnagg, he is able to sail to Japan and then to England.

In the fourth part of the novel, Gulliver visits the land of Houyhnhnms, a race of intelligent horses who are cleaner, rational, communal and benevolent than the brutish, filthy, greedy and degenerate humanoid race called Yahoos. The Houyhnhnms are very curious about Gulliver who seems to be both Yahoo and civilized, but after Gulliver describes his country and its history to the master Houyhnhnm, they conclude that the people of England are not more reasonable than the Yahoos. At last, it is decided that Gulliver must leave the Houyhnhnms. Gulliver then returns to England, he avoids his family and buys horses and converses with them instead.

The novel speaks about Gulliver's Travels into several remote nations of the world, in Four Parts and the adventurous journey filled with elements of fantasy by Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of several

ships, or Gulliver's Travels, as it is better known, for any layman, is not just another children's story. Featuring fantastical creatures and fictional islands, it has all the elements of 'children's literature'. Reading the original generally comes as a shock to adult readers. All children's versions predictably excise portions with vivid descriptions of bodily processes and bowel movements, or those containing graphic imagery of large insects. But what stands out in these is the complete absence of the satirical tone that Swift was celebrated for, the question of humanity which is still relevant today. The author has some basic viewpoints about life. The author makes it clear that he advocates his unbiased view of life in the guise of an exciting story. The two journeys of Gulliver, seek to strike a balance between two contradictory situations, the moral we learn from these sections of the novel is that we must uphold the value of tolerance in order to live a balanced life.

As a children's text, however Gulliver's Travels, gives us a better insight into the adult readers themselves. Sanitizing the book and the subsequent popularity of the sanitized versions tell us of the need to protect the adult reader whom Swift criticizes so blatantly in the novel. Viewing children's editions of Travels as a "shield" for adults act as further proof of Swift's accusations on mankind, reasserting the validity of his text. However, this only constitutes one side of the coin. Considering a different argument would tell us that a message as strong as what Swift tries to convey should be brought across to all sorts of readers, even if not in the manner of the original text. Children being made aware of the follies of mankind, after all, is exemplary of the fundamental moral message of all children's stories.

The idyllic voyages of Lilliput and Brobdingnag, in most editions, are presented as lessons in harmony and acceptance of differences. Apart from being delightful for a child as magnificent fantastical creatures, they

also uphold the basic notion of moving beyond appearance. Size and virtue not being related, is a message that most children grasp from this narrative, consciously or subconsciously. While Lilliput seems to tell them

how “little people” are not morally diminutive, the Brobdingnagian giants teach them to move beyond the “big and the ugly”. The “low points” of the original narratives are exalted in the sanitized versions; in the movie directed by Rob Letterman, for example, Gulliver diffusing a fire by urinating on it makes him a “hero” amongst the Lilliputians whereas the same act genre lot of disdain from the princes the original text.

In more generic terms, *Travels* as a children’s text can be seen as essentially didactic and moralistic in tone, as opposed to the harsh, satirical voice of the original. One of the lines uttered by Gulliver in the 1960 adaptation, *The Three Worlds of Gulliver*, effectively brings out the larger message that lies at the core of Swift’s novel; “the bad qualities of the pettiness of Lilliput and ignorance Brobdingnag are of inside everyone”. Summing up the crux of the story of Gulliver, these lines in the film present to us a sync between the adaptation and the original, the difference lying only in the mode of storytelling. Gulliver here is more lovable and “hero-like” unlike the misanthrope of Swift’s text. It tries to depict both the good and the bad of human! Unlike the original that sees. Gulliver eventually touts the entire human race as “evil” and “beastly”. It is clear that the point Swift is trying to make about humanity is all-pervasive; it is as true and imperative today as it was during his time. Loss of the satirical tone doesn’t necessarily lead to the loss of the larger message of the text. Fashioning it into a children’s story not only tells us of the importance of the young readers, but of the text itself.

Works Cited

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver’s Travels*. Dover’s Publications, 2012.