

Jonathan Swift's Satirical Comments on War in

Gulliver's Travels

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In *Gulliver's Travel's* Jonathan Swift satirizes many of the foibles and weaknesses human beings possess. Among the several problems that Swift symbolically discusses is mankind's tendency to resolve conflict and disagreement through violent rather than rational methods or the problem of human violence as manifested through war. Mr. Swift, in his book published first in 1727, examines the motives, causes, and the results of war through the symbolic characters of his novel who represent various aspects of human behavior. Examples of man's inhumanity to man abound in life and in Mr. Swift's fictitious creation as reported by the protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, and as represented specifically in the civil war between the Lilliputians and the Blefusians, the Laputans desire for and methods of achieving domination, and the war-like nature of the apelike/anthropoid Yahoos of the island of the Houyhnhnms.

The wars between the Lilliputians and the Blefusians, who in comparison to Gulliver were only 1/12 his height or 1/1728 his volume continued for over 36 months and were caused by rebellions incited by the disagreements between two factions of egg breakers: those who broke their eggs on the large end (the Big Endians) and those who broke them on the small end (perhaps the similarity to the word "Indians" is coincidental.). The wars between them caused the loss of lives and property. Swift seems to be saying in his indirect satirical way that contemporary wars are fought for equally petty reasons such as those concerning religious belief or the desire to gain more property. Retaliation against aggression or the protection or coercive enforcement of philosophical beliefs are also causes of war although ironically the philosophical or religious beliefs the aggressor claims to possess often support the idea of the brotherhood and equality of all mankind as well as the peaceful coexistence of all world citizens and thus contradict the actions of the aggressor.

Swift satirizes the Laputan's desire for domination through the manipulation of their floating island which hovers above the subordinate island of Balnibarbi below. The island can rise and fall and the Laputan king has two methods of squelching rebellion and assuring obedience. One is by blocking sunlight that would ordinarily reach the town below, the lack of which would cause disease, pestilence, and loss of plant life and crops thus causing starvation; in addition, the town below can be pelted with stones from above which brings to mind the use of military aircraft and the dropping

of bombs on villages. By extreme measure, the other method the king can employ is to cause the entire island of four and a half miles in diameter to descend directly on the town below thereby crushing its entire contents and inhabitants which is analogous to the destruction of entire cities with atomic bombs. Swift is demonstrating that with military threat rulers or politicians are able to assure the subservience of their subjects.

In the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* which concerns the voyage to the island of the Houyhnhnms Mr. Swift is most explicit in his description of his aversion to war. In this book he describes the animal, monkey-like Yahoo who, in crude physical characteristics, resembles human beings. He describes the animal and violent nature of the animal which represents the uncivilized side of human nature, what Sigmund Freud would later refer to as the id: the untamed, animal side of the psyche that resorts to violence and participates in warlike activity. Gulliver, when he describes the Yahoos, describes something that resembles the evolutionary predecessors of human beings:

They had beards like goats and a long ridge of hair down their backs and the fore parts of their legs and their feet, the rest of their bodies were bare (except the pubic areas). They had no tails. The Yahoos were the most filthy, noisome, and deformed animal which nature ever produced. They would privately suck the teats of the Houyhnhnms cows; kill and devour their cats and trample down their oats if they were not continually watched; and commit a thousand other extravagances. Once, when Gulliver struck one, a herd of at least forty came flocking around, howling and making faces and later discharged excrement on him from the tree branches above.

Since Gulliver was considered to be a civilized Yahoo by the superior horse-like inhabitants of the island, the Houyhnhnms, he was asked by them about the causes that made humans or one country go to war against another. He replied that reasons varied from the "ambition of princes who never have enough to the corruption of ministers. Differences of opinion sometimes as petty as the

Catholics' and Protestants' disagreements on the method of communion or the style of garments the priests should wear or whether or not there should be music in church. Sometimes wars are fought because the country is too strong; sometimes because the country is too weak. Sometimes neighbors covet what we have or sometimes we want what they have" (ironically, the aggressor often destroys that which he says he wants to possess). "If a prince sends forces into a nation where people are poor or ignorant he may legally kill half and make slaves of the remainder in order to `civilize' them and save them from their barbarous way of life. Poor nations are hungry and rich nations are proud and each have their reasons for attacking the other. A soldier is a Yahoo hired to kill" (soldiers are mercenary) "members of his own species who have never done any harm to him and often to no one else." Swift, speaking through Gulliver, goes on to describe the weapons that mankind employs to destroy members of his own species.

Swift in his biting satire is able to make harsh criticism of human behavior even harsher than if directly stated by employing fantastical situations. Through diminution and hyperbole Swift exposes the flaws of human nature through the Lilliputians, Laputans, Houyhnhnms, and Yahoos like a physician describing the symptoms of an illness so that society can someday correct destructive behavior. Perhaps someday all of the Yahoos of the world will be eliminated through enlightenment, and peace and harmony will prevail in society, differences will be resolved rationally, and wars will only be read about in works of fiction and history.