

Gulliver's Travels



Brief Biography of Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift was born to a lawyer in Dublin in 1667 and attended Trinity College. He went on to be a politician's secretary, a country parson, and a chaplain, all of which provided material for his satires about the political and religious corruption of his society. During his brief time in England, Swift, Alexander Pope, and others formed the Scriblerus Club resolving to write books satirizing modern knowledge. Gulliver's Travels, Swift's most famous work, arose from that resolution. Swift was also an outspoken advocate in favor of Irish liberty from England and Swift's second most famous work, A Modest Proposal, satirizes tensions between the Irish and the English. In his later years, Swift is said to have become misanthropic and bitter. He died of a stroke in 1745.

Historical Context of Gulliver's Travels

In the early eighteenth century, Britain's political atmosphere underwent a dramatic shift. While Queen Anne sat on the throne from 1665 to 1714, the Tory party was in favor and dominated politics with their conservative agenda of minimized parliamentary power and increased royal authority. Yet when King George I took power in 1714, the dynamics shifted and the liberal Whig party, the conservative Tory party's opponents, gained traction in English politics, pushing Tories out of prominence. One of these Tories was Jonathan Swift and parts of Gulliver's Travels (especially Gulliver's adventures in Lilliput) satirize the Whigs' and Tories' struggles against each other.

Gulliver's Travels is an adventure story (in reality, a misadventure story) involving several voyages of Lemuel Gulliver, a ship's surgeon, who, because of a series of mishaps en route to recognized ports, ends up, instead, on several unknown islands living with people and animals of unusual sizes, behaviors, and philosophies, but who, after each adventure, is somehow able to return to his home in England where he recovers from these unusual experiences and then sets out again on a new voyage.

Book I:

When the ship Gulliver is traveling on is destroyed in a storm, Gulliver ends up on the island of Lilliput, where he awakes to find that he has been captured by Lilliputians, very small people — approximately six inches in height. Gulliver is treated with compassion and concern. In turn, he helps them solve some of their problems, especially their conflict with their enemy, Blefuscu, an island across the bay from them. Gulliver falls from favor, however, because he refuses to support the Emperor's desire to enslave the Blefuscudians and because he "makes water" to put out a palace fire. Gulliver flees to Blefuscu, where he converts a large war ship to his own use and sets sail from Blefuscu eventually to be rescued at sea by an English merchant ship and returned to his home in England.