

Gulliver's Travels=

Jonathan Swift=

Character of Lemuel Gulliver=

Although Gulliver is a bold adventurer who visits a multitude of strange lands, it is difficult to regard him as truly heroic. Even well before his slide into misanthropy at the end of the book, he simply does not show the stuff of which grand heroes are made. He is not cowardly—on the contrary, he undergoes the unnerving experiences of nearly being devoured by a giant rat, taken captive by pirates, shipwrecked on faraway shores, sexually assaulted by an eleven-year-old girl, and shot in the face with poison arrows. Additionally, the isolation from humanity that he endures for sixteen years must be hard to bear, though Gulliver rarely talks about such matters. Yet despite the courage Gulliver shows throughout his voyages, his character lacks basic greatness. This impression could be due to the fact that he rarely shows his feelings, reveals his soul, or experiences great passions of any sort. But other literary adventurers, like Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, seem heroic without being particularly open about their emotions.

What seems most lacking in Gulliver is not courage or feelings, but drive. One modern critic has described Gulliver as possessing the smallest will in all of Western literature: he is simply devoid of a sense of mission, a goal that would make his wandering into a quest. Odysseus's goal is to get home again, Aeneas's goal in Virgil's *Aeneid* is to found Rome, but Gulliver's goal on his sea voyage is uncertain. He says that he needs to make some money after the failure of his business, but he rarely mentions finances throughout the work and indeed almost never even mentions home. He has no awareness of any greatness in what he is doing or what he is working toward. In short, he has no aspirations. When he leaves home on his travels for the first time, he gives no impression that he regards himself as undertaking a great endeavor or embarking on a thrilling new challenge.

We may also note Gulliver's lack of ingenuity and savvy. Other great travelers, such as Odysseus, get themselves out of dangerous situations by exercising their wit and ability to trick others. Gulliver seems too dull for any battles of wit and too unimaginative to think up tricks, and thus he ends up being passive in most of the situations in which he finds himself. He is held captive several times throughout his voyages, but he is never once released through his own stratagems, relying instead on chance factors for his liberation. Once presented with a way out, he works hard to escape, as when he repairs the boat he finds that delivers him from Blefuscu, but he is never actively ingenious in attaining freedom. This example summarizes quite well Gulliver's intelligence, which is factual and practical rather than imaginative or introspective.

Gulliver is gullible, as his name suggests. For example, he misses the obvious ways in which the Lilliputians exploit him. While he is quite adept at navigational calculations and the humdrum details of seafaring, he is far less able to reflect on himself or his nation in any profoundly critical way. Traveling to such different countries and returning to England in between each voyage, he seems poised to make some great anthropological speculations

about cultural differences around the world, about how societies are similar despite their variations or different despite their similarities. But, frustratingly, Gulliver gives us nothing of the sort. He provides us only with literal facts and narrative events, never with any generalizing or philosophizing. He is a self-hating, self-proclaimed Yahoo at the end, announcing his misanthropy quite loudly, but even this attitude is difficult to accept as the moral of the story. Gulliver is not a figure with whom we identify but, rather, part of the array of personalities and behaviors about which we must make judgments.