

Swift as a misanthrope (man-hater) with reference to *Gulliver's Travels*

Jonathan Swift is an enigma. Several critics are of the opinion that he hated mankind; and indeed there are enough examples in *Gulliver's Travels* alone to endorse this view, even if we ignore works like *A Modest Proposal* where Swift modestly proposes that Irishmen may be raised like hogs and cooked for dinner to tackle the problems of overpopulation and hunger. In a famous letter to his friend Pope, Swift had said- "I have ever hated all nations, Professions and Communities, and all my love is towards individuals; for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love counsellor such a one, Judge such a one; . . .so with Physicians . . .Soldiers, English, Scotch, French and the rest, but principally I hate and detest that animal called Man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas and so forth. . .Upon the whole great foundation of misanthropy.. the whole building of my "Travels" is erected. This by itself has earned for him the allegation of misanthrope, a hater of mankind. Also this allegation has taken root particularly because of the theme and plotline of Book IV, and not so much regarding the other books, for it is true that Gulliver's outlook becomes increasingly dark and pessimistic as the narrative unfolds. From the genial, cheerful traveller that we see in the voyage to Lilliput, we see him changing to a ruthless (his suggestions for exterminating the Yahoos), cold (he has no feelings left at all for his wife and child), ungrateful (his ingratitude to the hospitality of Pedro de Mendez) bitter misanthrope at the end of the voyage to the land of Houyhnhnms (whinnims / whinnums) .

However, we must remember that Gulliver is not Swift. This is a mistake that most people have a habit of making. Gulliver is an everyman, reacting to the adventures in his voyages as a common man of England would do. It is quite illogical to equate the author with the object of his creation, and particularly when the author himself has said nothing to endorse this opinion. In real life Swift is quite different from the person that Gulliver shows himself to be. In real life we see him befriending contemporaries like Pope, Gray, Delaney, and others, and sincerely caring for his Stella, whose death leaves him devastated. Throughout his life he donated one-third of his income to charity, and when he died he left all his money to build a hospital for the mentally ill – a hospital that stands till today. A true hater of mankind would never have had the heart to do all this. Also, a true misanthrope would be thinking of exterminating mankind from the face of the earth, as the Houyhnhnms plan for the Yahoos, not thinking of ways to make his lot better on the earth, as Swift had done.

Swift is basically a satirist, and the primary aim of a satirist is to improve man's life on earth by thinking and acting in a better manner. As such, a satirist can never be a misanthrope. The very concept of a misanthropic satirist is an oxymoron or contradiction in terms. Even when Swift is at his most bitter, as in *A Tale of a Tub* and *A Modest Proposal* his underlying aim of rectifying the society cannot be questioned. As a scathing attack on the pride, pretensions, and vices of mankind, *Gulliver's Travels* cannot be aimed at destroying society, but rather preserving it. In his respect Swift remains a humanist and a philanthropist which is the polar opposite of a misanthrope.

We may also look at the final chapter of Book IV – the part that has drawn the most criticism and is considered to be the most cynical in the entire narrative. Gulliver is saved by Pedro de Mendez, who is a person closest to the Houyhnhnms benevolence that can be envisaged in a human being. Gulliver's behaviour is discourteous and ungrateful- something that he should not have displayed after his stay with such exemplary beings. He looks on all men as Yahoos, and behaves towards them as Houyhnhnms behave towards the Yahoos, referring to man as “a lump of deformity and disease both in body and in mind, smitten with pride.” When he reaches home he cannot bear the touch of his wife, and spends all his time in the stables, tending to the horses. His insane separation from his own species makes him the butt of attack from all quarters, and his rejection of his wife, who has waited for years for him to return to her, is absolutely inexcusable.

However, we may interpret this chapter from a different angle altogether. Instead of seeing it as an account of Gulliver being separated from humanity, we may rather treat it as showing the separated Gulliver returning to humanity. By the end of the book we find that we can sit at the same table with his wife, and there is a feeling that as time goes on, he will return to normal. As such Mendez plays a sterling role in the story- he not only saves Gulliver's life; he is the one who convinces him to return to his country and his family, and to integrate himself with a society that he had so far rejected. As such, even if Gulliver is interpreted as Swift's counterpart, the author cannot be interpreted to have cut himself off from humanity. Gulliver's misanthropy borders on insanity whereas Swift sees his misanthropy as an altruistic effort for the upliftment of mankind.