

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Gulliver's Travels (Unabridged) by Jonathan Swift

## Book Information

Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels (Unabridged)  
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Book Level: 13.5  
Interest Level: UG

The voyages of an Englishman carry him to a land of people six inches high, a land of giants, an island of sorcerers, and a land where horses are masters of human-like creatures.

**Topics:** Adventure, Escape; Adventure, Survival; Adventure, Travel; Classics, Classics (All); Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

## Main Characters

Climenole Laputan domestic appointed to bring his master to reality  
Flimnap Lord High Treasurer of Lilliput  
Glumdalclitch Gulliver's nurse; the daughter of Gulliver's master in Brobdingnag  
Golbasto Momaren Evlame Gurdilo Shefin Mully Ullly Gue emperor of Lilliput  
Houyhnhnms rational horses who are masters of the Yahoos  
Lemuel Gulliver "author" of the book  
Mary Burton Gulliver Gulliver's wife  
Munodi the governor of Lagado, on Balnibarbi  
Pedro de Mendez a kindly captain who helps Gulliver return to England  
struldbrugs a race of beings who age without dying  
Yahoos odious, human-like creatures in the Land of Houyhnhnm

## Vocabulary

**discern** discover with the eyes or the mind  
**etymology** history of a word  
**ignominious** not reputable or decent

**melancholy** quality, state, or instance of being sad or depressed  
**prodigious** extraordinary in size or degree  
**propagate** reproduce biologically, or cause to spread

## Synopsis

Lemuel Gulliver was educated in medicine. After a few years as a ship's doctor, he returns home to England, marries, and begins practicing medicine. His practice fails, and he returns to sea, bound for the East Indies. Encountering a storm, he is shipwrecked and finds himself on an island. He discovers the island of Lilliput is populated with small people. He tries to learn their customs and ways. Soon he learns they are at war with the Big-Endians, or the people of Blefuscu who break their eggs at the big ends. Many people have died in this war. Gulliver helps out the Lilliputians when the Blefuscuans threaten to attack, and he is heralded a hero. Soon, though, the emperor wants to use Gulliver to enslave and rule over the Blefuscuans. Gulliver opposes this. Soon after he puts out a fire in the palace by urinating on it. This act, along with other things, almost causes him to be executed. He soon escapes and returns to England, where he prospers exhibiting the Lilliputian cattle.

Soon Gulliver is out to sea again. This time he lands on the island of Brobdingnag, which is populated by giants. Gulliver hides in a wheat field, but is caught and given to a farmer, who exhibits the tiny Gulliver and makes a nice profit. The farmer's daughter, Glumdalclitch, is quite taken with Gulliver. Soon the queen hears about Gulliver and purchases him from the farmer; she allows Glumdalclitch to come along as Gulliver's nurse. The queen is fascinated by Gulliver, and the Brobdingnagians think of him as an amusement or toy, not as an equal. After some time there, Gulliver visits the sea in his specially made box, and an eagle soon appears and sweeps him away. He lands in the water and is shortly rescued by some English sailors.

Gulliver is intent on sailing again, so he leaves England and heads for the sea. His ship is

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overtaken by pirates, and Gulliver is forced to leave the ship in a canoe. He soon spots a floating island in the sky. He is drawn up onto the island of Laputa. The men of this island are obsessed with contemplating science and mathematics. They also use their power to keep other lands in control, threatening to use force against them. Gulliver visits Lagado, the capital of Balnibarbi. There he finds a group of people known as the Projectors, who study impractical things and make useless inventions. Next, he visits Glubbudrib, an island of sorcerers and magicians who can summon dead people back to the earth. Gulliver visits with many of them. Finally, Gulliver visits Luggnagg, which is populated by immortal, yet very unwise, people. Although they do not die, they age and become useless and feeble.

Gulliver's last visit is to the island of the Houyhnhnms, which is populated by rational, speaking horses, as well as filthy, human-like creatures called Yahoos. Gulliver is appalled by the odious Yahoos and devoted to his Houyhnhnm master. He learns the language and tells his master many things about his people. Unfortunately, it only makes him seem more like a Yahoo. Gulliver strives to become like the horses, even trotting around and whinnying. The Houyhnhnms fear Gulliver's attempt to be like them, and soon he is ordered to leave. When Gulliver returns home, he has a difficult time fitting into society, as well as accepting his family. Everyone is a Yahoo to him. He spends much time in barns communing with horses.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

What are some examples of Gulliver's stubborn pride?

*He called the king of Brobdingnag a nobody because no one had ever heard of his kingdom. He was arrogant enough to suggest he use gunpowder to enslave his subjects. Also, his pride keeps him from identifying himself with the Yahoos and instead drives him to actually try to become a Houyhnhnm. He cannot even fathom that he might be like the Yahoos. And, when he finally returns to his home in England, he cannot bear the sight of humans because he thinks they are Yahoos. He elevates himself to a moral status above everyone else.*

### Literary Analysis

How is the book's ending ironic?

*Gulliver warns against the sin of pride, and yet his pride has him still trying to be a horse.*

### Inferential Comprehension

What was Swift's attitude toward intellect and reason?

*Humans take too much pride in their abilities. They use intellect to make weapons, enslave people, wage wars, and force beliefs on others. Reason and pride are a dangerous combination.*

### Constructing Meaning

Gulliver seems to worship and idolize the Houyhnhnms as the perfect race of beings. Why might being a Houyhnhnm not be as wonderful as Gulliver thought?

*They do not care for their young because of love or affection. They breed for strength and looks. They are a moral society, but they are passionless. They do not mourn their dead when they pass on, which indicates that they do not truly care about each other. Also, they have no literature and understand only a limited number of things. They do not live full lives.*

## Teachable Skills

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**Understanding Literary Features** When Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, his purpose was not merely to entertain. He wanted to expose human vice in all people. His novel was considered coarse and vulgar. Then a Dr. Bowdler came along, removed all satiric content from *Gulliver's Travels*, and turned it into a children's book. Have students read a children's version of the novel, and then compare it to the original. What changes have been made? Is it still powerful? What are the messages and themes in the children's version? What are the themes in the original?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** It is known that Swift's real-life model for the character of Flimnap was Robert Walpole, the leader of the Whigs. He was England's first modern prime minister. He resigned from office in 1717, but was later restored through the influence of his mistress, the Duchess of Kendal. It is also believed that the Duchess of Kendal was the figurative cushion onto which Flimnap fell when he was rope jumping. Walpole used war sentiments to retain power, but secretly he believed that England was better off in times of peace. Apparently, Swift mocks this with Flimnap's somersaults in the air. For a project, have students research Robert Walpole and write an essay about his influence on Swift's character of Flimnap. Find instances in the story that might be based on Walpole's life.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The Houyhnhnm society is essentially a utopia. According to scholars, Swift's book on these horses contains details taken from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, which proposes a utopian society as a cure for human vices. More, in turn, was influenced by Plato's *Republic*. For an assignment, have students read all or excerpts from *Utopia*, *Republic*, or both. What are their authors proposing and why? How does Swift's satire effectively show that utopias are ineffective and unsuitable for humans?

**Responding to Literature** Classic literature is very often made into films. *Gulliver's Travels* is no exception. After completing the novel, show

students two of the film versions. The older film version was popular many years ago. More recently, there has been a Hallmark production with Ted Danson. Which film do the students prefer? Which is more true to the original story? How do they differ, and do any changes add to or detract from the novel?