Imagine being larger than life, and, in one swift night, your circumstances flip. Instead of being a celebrity, prince, or god among men, you no longer have any significant power and are subject to the mercy of the people around you. That was the reality that Johnathan Swift wrote for Gulliver in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Gulliver was, at one point, a giant to tiny humans, but, in a change of events, he became a toy to actual giants. What was the point? What was Swift trying to achieve? In order to show Swift’s true objective, I will dive into the text of Swift’s work, explore Gulliver’s first two travels, and prove that Swift is trying to present the short comings that exist within human nature.

When attempting to understand Swift’s objective, one must first understand the significance of Gulliver’s first travel versus his second travel. Swift purposely changed Gulliver’s perspective from the first travel to the second travel in order to show that humans, whether big or small, all fall short of being perfect. According to William A. Eddy, Johnathan Swift uses “the satire of position which runs through the first two voyages…the device is to reduce the scale of human life, correspondingly to elevate the point of view, so as to render ridiculous all that is essentially petty” (Eddy 353). In Gulliver’s first travel, Gulliver had a rare opportunity to be an extremely imposing figure. The first of Gulliver’s voyages started in an unfortunate “shipwreck in the empire of Lilliput, where he finds himself a giant among a diminutive people, charmed by their miniature city and amused by their toylike prettiness (Swift 2323). Gulliver walked into the chance of a lifetime. Most people will never know what it means to be so grand; it was his luck that had offered to a situation that, at first glance, seemed advantageous for him. Most people would agree that a god among men would always have the upper hand but we see from *Gulliver’s Travels* that was not the case.

Swift must have had a vast understanding of the human nature. It seems Swift knew the way ‘polite society’ (the Lilliputians) would react to a phenomenon (Gulliver) in which it is not prepared. This is evident when Gulliver first shipwrecked. According to Swift, Gulliver:
Attempted to rise, but was not able to stir: for as I (he) happened to lie on my (his) back, I (he) found my (his) arms and legs were strongly fastened on each side of the ground; and my (his) hair, which was long and thick, tied down in the same manner. I (He) likewise felt several slender ligatures across my (his) body, from my (his) armpits to my (his) thighs. I (He) could only look upward (2329).

To be in power is unlike anything, but to walk into power is a rarity, and, like people whom have walked into power, Gulliver was not trusted with his new found superiority. Just as Hercules was shunned by society because of his physical abilities, so was Gulliver. Swift understood that humans are afraid of the unknown, and that is why Gulliver awoke in restraints. When dealing with the strange or unfamiliar, humans are untrusting, cold hearted individuals. This was not all that could be learned by observing the Lilliputians. With further observation, one can learn that the Lilliputians were a flawed society with odd practices. The most odd would be the “rope-dancers” which were “practiced by those persons who are candidates for great employments, and high favor, at court” (Swift 2340). Rope-dancing was basically an audition for a job in politics or a way to showcase one’s own greatness. This particular practice shows the small-mindedness of the Lilliputians and the ignorance that can be seen in humanity. In life, there are miniscule aspects of life that are mistakenly emphasize and obsessed over. Holidays can be compared to rope-dancing. An extreme amount of importance is placed on holidays. Most holidays were created and were originally celebrated because of an event or string of events that previously happened. For example, Christmas was made to celebrate the birth of Christ, which brought families together at the end of the year. Now, Christmas is arguably more about presents than Christ and brings families together on the basis of them receiving something. The point is that humans are often unaware of their own foolishness and often promote their own decadence.

The Lilliputians mirror modern society. They convened in a court to decide the fate of Gulliver, even though he did nothing wrong. Only when he promises to not attack but to defend the kingdom along with other demands do they free him. Human nature tells us to survive, and this is apparent when the Lilliputians only free Gulliver when it doesn’t negatively affect them. The selfishness and un-empathetic attitude of humanity comes forth. When looking at Gulliver’s first travel closely, we see that he actually was a slave to his own power and, despite his size, he had no influence on the Lilliputian society. The original thought that Gulliver would be able to seize a major opportunity and possibly take control of the miniature people is now an
afterthought. The Lilliputians were small but they were still human, and, like modern human society, size no longer matters. The time of ‘the warrior’ is over. Those who are born bigger, faster, or stronger are no longer superior or more in control than the next person. Just think; the majority of humans usually have experienced a time where they were in power. Whether that power is miniscule or great, those in power often have to earn it. One might believe that being as big as Gulliver amongst the Lilliputians would lend Gulliver the keys to the kingdom, but that was not the case. Even the famous and/or the powerful are subject to criticism and even ridicule from the people that they are worshipped by. Gulliver looked down on the Lilliputians. They were ignorant and petty. Their monarchal society was flawed, and Gulliver sought to escape the violent and spiteful people of Lilliput. A lesson can be learned from Gulliver’s first experience, what once thought was pretty has now become petty. Swift makes one inquire if God looks down on humanity in such a way?

Gulliver’s second shipwreck brought him to the land of the Brobdingnags. Once again, Gulliver has been dealt a bad hand by fate and is grounded in a foreign land. Gulliver, who was shipwrecked with a crew, got separated and upon the return to the boat, he sees the men “rowing for life to the ship” (Swift 2366). He “observed a huge creature walking after them in the sea as fast he could; he waded not much deeper than his knees” (Swift). Gulliver referred to the creature as a monster but what he witnessed was a giant. Gulliver’s perspective quickly changes. In life, most people will never have an experience that resembles Gulliver trials: from rich to poor, famous to infamous, or power to sub-mediocre. Gulliver, with one look at the giant, deemed the creature a monster, even though he too was looked at in a similar way. Gulliver’s quick words about the giant show the judgmental, unforgiving, and forgetful nature humanity. It was Gulliver who was once looked at as a monster, but there is no sensitivity in his words. It wasn’t until Gulliver fled the coast that he began thinking of Lilliput and how the people looked at him “as the greatest prodigy that ever appeared in the world” (Swift). “We generally assume that each of us sees the world from his or her own point of view. It would be distressing if we found that our sense of the world differed fundamentally from everyone else's” (Donoghue 128). Human nature often leans toward humbleness when faced with despair. Only in tragedy can we appreciate how others may feel. It isn’t until a rich man becomes poor does he have sympathy for the poor.

Gulliver’s situation really becomes epic when he actually comes in contact with a
Brobdingnag. He is picked up and pinched between the fingers of a farm boy, shoved in the farm boy’s pocket and presented to the farm boy’s master. Gulliver is worried, and he should be because “human creatures are observed to be more savage and cruel in proportion to their bulk” (Swift 2367). Swift hints at this behavior in his writing. Despite Gulliver’s advances to get on equal footing with the Brobdingnags, they are too amused with his stature and treated him as if he were a toy, much like how an older sister treats a younger sister and in turn the younger sister treats her Barbie doll. The greater the size and/or influence, the less respect or care shown towards those with less than sufficient size and/or influence. That’s human nature at its best. It boils down to survival of the fittest. The weak or meager cannot, by their power alone, survive or empower themselves. As mentioned earlier, you are subject to the mercy of the people around you.

Not being the “Brobdingnag” had its advantages for Gulliver. He had the chance to view humanity in different way. Because he was so small compared the indigenous people, Gulliver had a chance to see humanity at a rare closeness. Due to his stature, Gulliver had the unfortunate opportunity to see the ugly imperfections of the human body. He saw the breast of a woman about to breast feed and, as he put it, “no object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast. The nipple was about half of the bigness of my head, and the hue both of that and the dug so verified with spots, pimples, and freckles that nothing could appear more nauseous” (Swift 2370). In the words of an unnamed Lilliputian, the skin “appeared much fairer and smoother when he looked…from the ground than it did upon a nearer view” (Swift). The clarity that the event presented brought things full circle for Gulliver. It was then that he realized exactly how hideous he must have looked to the Lilliputians. A phrase is often stated when a person does not take heed from someone who has experienced an ordeal but instead learns from experiencing the ordeal themselves: Experience is the best teacher. Gulliver all but ignored the Lilliputian words until he experienced a drastic change of scenery himself and saw how hideous humanity could be.

Swift was very clever in his writing. One must think in depth about Gulliver’s experiences and not judge too quickly. To define Gulliver’s first two voyages based on a meager glance is to judge them incorrectly. One would see a mere physical change in circumstance, giant to toy, when, in actuality, there was a cognitive change that Gulliver experienced. Gulliver had seen the imperfections of the big and the small. He examined both groups but the most important
part of the story is that he himself had a chance, in principle, to be both a Lilliputian and Brobdingnag. Through Gulliver, Swift showed that no matter the circumstances of one’s condition, imperfections exist in everything. To look at both voyages is to see the inadequacies Swift notices in the human condition and Swift’s passionate dislike of such inadequacies. Each instance that leads to an extended stay with a foreign people brought out negative views of human-like beings. The Lilliputians were petty, ignorant, and small minded little people who sought to take advantage of Gulliver. The Brobdingnags were big, ugly, and rude creatures that didn’t respect Gulliver. They treated him as if he were a toy and didn’t acknowledge the face Gulliver was also a living, breathing person. Both groups are clear examples of how Johnathan Swift, who was labeled as a misanthrope, severely criticized mankind and all things man related: from politics to social interactions. It is true that “Gulliver’s Travels” is Swift’s most enduring satire. Although full of allusions…it still rings true today, for its objects are human failings, and the defective political, economic, and social institutions that they call into being” (Swift 2323). Humans and societies judge and forget lessons of the past, but the wisdom of experience can offer a needed shift in perspective
Works Cited

