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Age of Unreason

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Just a Struldbrug Girl, Living in a Luggnagg World: The Struggle for Individualism in
Mainstream Society

Introduction

In Part III, Chapter X of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver second guesses his desires for immortality after learning about the miserable existences of the immortals of Luggnagg—the Struldbrugs. Although the passage is relatively short, its harrowing descriptions of poverty and loneliness effectively turn Gulliver off from the idea of immortality. While it may seem like Swift provides commentary solely on mankind's misguided wishes for immortality, he also offers a more covert observation that arises from the Luggnaggians' treatment of the Struldbrugs. Gulliver is led to believe that the Struldbrugs' immortality causes their misery, but a closer look reveals that the Luggnaggians are the root cause of the Struldbrugs' suffering. Swift illustrates that modern civilization goes to great lengths to oppress both individuals and individual autonomy in order to preserve a societal equilibrium that prioritizes the mundane over the special, and thus the masses over the individual. In contrast to the previous criticisms in the novel about society's corruption of politics, religion, and education, this passage deals with the direct relationship between society and the individuals that comprise it.

Individualism Defined and Located in the Text

On the first reading, the Struldbrugs' plight is meant to turn people off from romanticizing immortality. However, Swift also uses the Struldbrugs of Luggnagg to represent

the individuals of any modern society. Most of the characters in *Gulliver's Travels* lack individualism or psychological complexity. They are mentioned only in passing, without emotions, independent thoughts, or motivations. Gulliver himself is not unique in character. He is an every-man who doesn't have any notable skills or ideas. Swift does this with the majority of the characters because it allows him to make generalizing statements for the sake of satire.

Unlike Gulliver and the populations of the other countries, the Struldbrugs are different. They are undeniably individualized due to their extraordinary immortality and rare births. They even have a physical marking on their foreheads that differentiate them from other Luggnaggians. The Struldbrugs stand out from society in both appearance and ability, but the Luggnaggians have already figured out how to assimilate them.

Class Divisions

The main way the Luggnaggians curb the individualism of the Struldbrugs is by segregating them into a low social class. Class systems are a recurring motif in the novel, but the Struldbrugs' separation is very different than the divisions among the other countries that Gulliver visits. These divisions are based on royalty, knowledge, or race. Lilliput's society is governed by an emperor and several government officials, and the rest of the Lilliputians are mentioned only as village-people, military personnel, or servants to the crown. Brobdingnag, though less barbaric, has a similarly structured class system. In the Laputian monarchy, the more knowledgeable are stationed on a giant, levitating rock that hovers above the lower, less educated people. Even the peaceful Houyhnhnms have divisions based on coat color, with the idea of one stepping "out of their own Race" being "monstrous and unnatural" (236). The Struldbrugs are different because their class is based on the ability of immortality, which occurs randomly, regardless of wealth, status or race. A Struldbrug born into a royal family will be treated the

same as a Struldbrug born into a peasant family. Since immortality occurs independently of traditional class divisions, the Luggnaggs create a different layer to the already existing hierarchy to deal with this uncertainty. By forcing the Struldbrugs into a separate class with specific laws and norms that stifle their influence in society, Swift suggests that societies are disinterested in individuals and their personal autonomies.

The Unreliable Narratives Concerning the Struldbrugs

Although Gulliver takes the information he's given about the Struldbrugs as fact, a closer examination exposes inconsistencies in the Luggnaggian narrative. The Luggnaggians have a biased history regarding the Struldbrugs, which allows them to justify their poor treatment of the immortals. For example, the Luggnaggians claim that the Struldbrugs are "uncapable of Friendship and dead to all natural affection" (196). However, the Struldbrugs are also "despised by all sorts of people; when one of them is born, it is reckoned ominous" (197). This raises a question of cause and effect: do the Luggnaggians hate the Struldbrugs because they are uncapable of friendship, or are the Struldbrugs uncapable of friendship because they are despised and ostracized from birth? Furthermore, the Luggnaggians claim that the Struldbrugs are generally "melancholy, dejected...peevish, covetous...and vain" (196). However, there are only two or three born in every mortal's lifespan, so there are "too few [recently born immortals] to form a general Observation" (196). In addition to this, the registry of Struldbrugs "hath not been kept above a thousand Years past, or at least hath been destroyed by time or public Disturbances (196)" Even though they lack a comprehensive understanding or history of the Struldbrugs, the Luggnaggians perpetuate negative stereotypes about them. At the end of the chapter, Gulliver makes his own assumption that the Struldbrugs would seize the "Civil Power," and cause the "Ruin of the Public" without the Luggnagg laws in place (198). None of the Luggnaggians

explicitly expressed this idea to Gulliver, but he accepts their ideology and projects his own insidious qualities onto the Struldbrugs. Here, Swift shows how societies sustain biased and unreliable histories that, once internalized, perpetuate the stereotyping of individuals.

The Systematic Oppression of Luggnagg Law

The Luggnaggians' treatment of the Struldbrugs represents society's treatment of the individual: cruel, indifferent, and systematic. Most of the awful things that happen to the Struldbrugs are imposed by Luggnaggian law and tradition. For example, once the Struldbrugs reach 80 years of age, their marriages are automatically dissolved. At this age, they are also "looked on as dead in Law," and the state seizes most of their money (196). They are forbidden from working, purchasing land, or participating in court proceedings, even in decisions about boundaries (197). The mention of boundaries suggests that people in the lowest classes have no say in how or why society is divided. The Luggnaggian society kills the Struldbrugs' potential, but it cannot kill them, so the Struldbrugs exist in a kind of purgatory. They never experience an end to their suffering, and they never live honorable or productive lives. Once they are dead in the eyes of the law, they become stuck in a societal trap, forced into a class that renders them irrelevant. Their autonomy is taken away. Their marriages are forcibly dissolved, putting them in further isolation. They are required to stay in Luggnagg by law, so they are physically stuck in their country. By lawfully closing off connection to the rest of the world, the Luggnaggians systematically segregate and imprison the Struldbrugs into their own class that robs them of their individuality.

Missed Opportunities

The Struldbrugs do not seem to be particularly feared, but they are disregarded in the best cases and hated in the worst. While the class system hinders the Struldbrugs' personal autonomy

and success, it negatively impacts the progress of the Luggnaggian society as well. Instead of appreciating the Struldbrugs as assets, the Luggnaggians banish them to the outskirts of society, shaming and squandering their unique powers and perspectives. Instead, the immortals could be conditioned to facilitate peace, educate others, and further civilization. Swift has already shown that the Luggnaggians are responsible for the oppression of the Struldbrugs, so they could certainly facilitate their cultivation and advancement. The Luggnaggians note that the Struldbrugs “have no Remembrance of anything but what they learned and observed in their Youth and middle age” (196). Assuming this is a reliable observation, that makes the education of the Struldbrugs even more imperative. Even though their bodies, and probably their minds, may deteriorate over time, their lives could be richer, more useful, and more enjoyable.

However, the Luggnaggians would prefer to perpetuate the stereotypes and poor treatment of the Struldbrugs to maintain the status quo, rather than embrace their individuality and encourage them to grow and prosper. Swift argues that when placed among the masses, an individual’s potential for success is hindered by desires for comfort and order, even if it limits everyone involved.

Conclusion

The Struldbrugs’ chapter is short in comparison to other passages, but it is incredibly dense. Swift manages to fit two social commentaries in just five pages. He expresses skepticism of immortality in the dialogue between Gulliver and his Luggnaggian guide, but he also shines a light on society’s treatment of individuals within that same dialogue. Swift can’t erase the class systems and status holders of the world in a single passage, but he can lead readers to ask how their own individualism has been suppressed by perpetual stereotyping, unreliable narratives, and unfair laws. Just as we are all the Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Laputans, Houyhnhnms, and

Yahoos, we are also the Struldbrugs. Our individualism may be an inconvenience to society, but it is not a threat. It is a key to a new world.