

The Curse of Immortality: The Struldbruggs in *Gulliver's Travels*

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When it comes to death, people often struggle to suppress their fear and desire to escape it. Immortality is frequently viewed as an appealing way to avoid the grim reality of death and surpass human limitations. However, Swift's in-depth satire on the "natural desire of endless life and sublunary Happiness"<sup>1</sup> masterfully unearths humanity's deepest fears and desires concerning immortality in a memorable manner.

### **Plot Summary**

Chapter X, Part III of *Gulliver's Travels* explores Gulliver's experiences in Luggnagg and his conversations with prominent figures about the Struldbruggs, or immortals. Initially, Gulliver is captivated by the idea of immortality, believing the Struldbruggs are "happiest beyond all comparison"<sup>2</sup> as they are spared the fear of death and can live unburdened by its constant threat. He imagines that as a Struldbrugg, he would gain unparalleled wisdom and happiness. However, once he learns the harsh truth of the Struldbruggs' existence, his desire for eternal life diminishes, and he realizes that "no Tyrant could invent a Death into which he would not run with Pleasure from such a Life."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World: In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver; First a Surgeon, and Then a Captain of Several Ships*, vol. 2, 136.

<sup>2</sup> Swift, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Swift, 145-146.

## Thesis and Argument

At first sight, Swift's portrayal of the Struldbruggs mocks humanity's yearning for eternal life by underscoring that perpetual youth is unattainable. Even the immortal Struldbruggs suffer from relentless aging, shattering the illusion that immortality is desirable. They endure deteriorating health, lose their ability to communicate, lack interests or passions, face financial ruin, and experience a significant drop in social status as they are despised and considered ill omens.

Furthermore, as *Gulliver's Travels* is a moral and political satire, the Struldbruggs embody the logical consequences of the desire for immortality. This desire is captured in the line: "every Man desired to put off Death for sometime longer ... and he rarely heard of any Man who died willingly, except he were incited by the Extremity of Grief or Torture."<sup>4</sup> The longing to extend life is an inherently irrational aspect of humanity, resulting in a state of suffering marked by deteriorating health, social isolation, and unending misery, as seen with the Struldbruggs. This obsession with longevity ultimately robs life of meaning, leaving them in a state worse than death, devoid of purpose or satisfaction.

## Lessons Learned from the Story

Swift's satirical portrayal of the Struldbruggs teaches us that living forever does

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<sup>4</sup> Swift, 139.

not guarantee a meaningful life. As mortals untouched by the curse of immortality, we can learn several valuable lessons to enrich our finite lives.

Firstly, acknowledging death as an inevitable natural law can liberate us from fear, transforming it into a driving force that compels us to seek our own meaning in life. As Freud suggests, “we are all ultimately in thrall to Thanatos, or the death drive.”<sup>5</sup> Living with the awareness of mortality brings “realism, irony, and truthfulness, and a chastening sense of our finitude and fragility.”<sup>6</sup>In this way, death adds depth and meaning to life, enriching it rather than stripping it of worth.

Second, cherishing the present helps us fully embrace happiness within the brevity of our lives. The Struldbruggs, despised and isolated, trapped within their suffering, were unable to enjoy their seemingly endless days. By contrast, we can seize the present by pursuing wisdom, cultivating creativity, and savoring the joy of each day. Whether through enjoying simple pleasures like lying on the grass in a warm, sunny afternoon or engaging deeply in a project, allows us to find fulfillment regardless of life’s fleeting nature.

Furthermore, death starkly reveals our limitations, showing us that living well requires aligning our needs with those of others. Through attentive listening, compassionate acts, and humble interactions, we foster reciprocal relationships that transcend individual pursuits, thus imbuing life with purpose and significance.

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 61.

<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, 61.

In conclusion, Swift's depiction of the Struldbruggs in *Gulliver's Travels* underscores futility of pursuing immortality. Instead, we should embrace the natural cycle of life and derive meaning from the moments we are granted.

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