The Curse of Immortality: The Struldbruggs in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*

Anrui Wang（王安瑞）

Student Number: 2023533015

GEHA1164.02: The Rise of the Novel/Midterm Paper

May 9, 2024

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”[[1]](#footnote-1) 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” [[2]](#footnote-2) 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.” [[3]](#footnote-3)

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 are a *reductio ad absurdum* since they represent the logical consequences attendant on the granting of such a wish”[[4]](#footnote-4). This wish is evident 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.” [[5]](#footnote-5)This kind of desire to live “or sometime longer” “is an aspect of the irrational in man”[[6]](#footnote-6), leading to a perpetual state of suffering marked by deteriorating physical and mental health, social isolation, and unending misery, as the Struldbruggs exemplify. This obsession with longevity ultimately strips life of meaning and leaves them in a condition far worse than death, incapable of finding satisfaction or purpose.

Lessons Learned from the Story

Swift’s satirical depiction of the Struldbruggs teaches us that living forever does not guarantee a meaningful life. As mortals who have not been cursed with immortality, we can learn several valuable lessons to make our finite lives more fulfilling:

1. **Accept Death as Inevitable:** Understanding that death is an unavoidable natural law can help us alleviate our fear of it, enabling us to approach our limited time with a more open and liberated mindset.
2. **Value the Present:** Seizing the present, pursuing wisdom, and embracing creativity allow us to cherish the moments of happiness in our brief lives.
3. **Give Life Greater Meaning:** By caring for and contributing to others, society, and nature, we transcend the limits of individual existence and infuse life with greater purpose.

In conclusion, Swift’s depiction of the Struldbruggs in *Gulliver’s Travels* teaches us that the pursuit for immortality is a fruitless endeavor. Instead, we should cherish the natural course of life and find meaning in the moments we have.

Bibliography

Barroll, J. Leeds. “Gulliver and the Struldbruggs.” *PMLA* 73, no. 1 (1958): 43–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/460274>.

Radner, John B. “The Struldbruggs, the Houyhnhnms, and the Good Life.” SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 17, no. 3 (1977): 419–33. doi:10.2307/450076.

Swift, Jonathan. *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. London: printed for Benj. Motte, at the Middle Temple-Gate in Fleet-Street, MDCCXXVI. [1726]. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (accessed May 4, 2024). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0109096271/ECCO?u=cnshtu&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=49c29ea7&pg=144>.

1. 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. London: Printed for Benj. Motte, at the Middle Temple-Gate in Fleet-Street, 1726. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0109096271/ECCO?u=cnshtu&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=49c29ea7&pg=144>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Swift, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Swift, 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J. Leeds Barroll. “Gulliver and the Struldbruggs.” *PMLA* 73, no. 1 (1958): 44.<https://doi.org/10.2307/460274>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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, 139. London: Printed for Benj. Motte, at the Middle Temple-Gate in Fleet-Street, 1726. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0109096271/ECCO?u=cnshtu&sid=bookmark-ECCO&xid=49c29ea7&pg=147>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. Leeds Barroll. “Gulliver and the Struldbruggs.” *PMLA* 73, no. 1 (1958): 44.<https://doi.org/10.2307/460274>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)