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Analytical Literary Response

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“Five hundred carpenters and engineers were immediately set at work to prepare the greatest engine they had. It was a frame of wood raised three inches off the ground, about seven foot long and four wide, moving upon twenty-two wheels” (Swift 2497).

In this passage from Part 1 of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Swift cleverly satirizes the hubris of the science and technology circle in England at the time, using specific tone and diction to highlight the notion that the modern “mechanical” movement is not as great as it seems.

Ironically, in order to achieve this satiric effect, Swift utilizes the very language of the enemy. The passage is scattered in seemingly precise numbers and measurements: *Five hundred* carpenters, *three inches*, *seven foot long, twenty-two* wheels. This is exactly the type of diction that would appeal to the logical, mathematician brains of his time—those of whom were so often derided in Swift’s writings. In addition to the numerical lingo, Swift splices up this passage with dramatic words and imagery. The Lilliputians are “immediately set at work” to build the “greatest engine” that exists in their society, giving readers the impression that some grand undertaking is about to occur. This dramatic tone, combined with the alluring presence of numeric diction, is just about enough to trick the 18th century English reader into taking the narrator’s story seriously. Nonetheless, if one takes a step back (or takes up a more farsighted approach, per se) from the lull of Swift’s satiric devices, they would see that the “greatest engine” is, in fact, not that great at all—it’s just a seven by four piece of wood with a couple of wheels. So why make such a fuss over it?

The answer lies in the didactic nature of the work as a whole, characteristic of neoclassic literature, and the message that Swift is trying to convey to his readers through the imaginary world of the Lilliputians. At an obvious (but not so obvious) level, Swift is attacking the science and technology community that came to rise during the time in which *Gulliver’s Travels* was written. Swift was opposed to the abstract nature of scientific thinking and believed it did little to benefit society. He was doubtful of the moral and ethical implications of so much left-brain thinking, which left little room for the soul, so to speak, or human rationality. Such a threat seems even more relevant today, when excessive and rationally unchecked feats of science and engineering have lead to catastrophic effects on mankind (the nuclear bomb, NSA surveillance). Thus, Swift pokes fun at the mathematicians and scientists and engineers, essentially equating their work to something as unimpressive as a wooden board with wheels.

On a broader level, however, this passage underlines a recurring theme in the story that is: things are not what they seem. Within the Lilliputian perspective, the seven by four feet engine truly feels like a masterful feat of engineering, and it brings great pride to their nation and its people. But anyone from Gulliver’s world, which is the reader’s world, would laugh at the fact that such a basic, medieval design accounts for what makes a nation so great. After all, the engine is only massive in the eyes of the tiny Lilliputians. To us, it’s barely taller than the average person. In effect, Swift forces readers to reflect on their own nation’s hubris, a mental check that was most definitely needed for England in a time of rabid colonization and technological advancement.

The satiric tone of this passage, as well as the whole of *Gulliver’s Travels*, essentially screams at readers to be reasonable and think twice about their own perspectives.