

RECENZE KNIH / BOOK REVIEWS

Economic, Social and Cultural Changes in England Based on Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels

Jindřiška Šulistová

Vysoká škola technická a ekonomická v Českých Budějovicích

Abstrakt

The following contribution brings a review of Jonathan Swift's book and aims to point out the cultural, economic and social changes in the eighteenth century in the J. Swift's satire. It concentrates on the important events and issues of that time such as wars between England and Holland, the Great fire in London, unnecessary scientific research and other issues seen and perceived by the writer himself. It offers a deep insight into contemporary society at that time.

Klíčová slova: cultural, economic, social changes, colonial and commercial interests, Great Fire of London, warless period, adventures, voyage, experiments

Introduction

The purpose of this review is to demonstrate how Swift satire reflects cultural, economic and social changes in England of that time. Swift covered a wide area of hot issues and changes (which he thought unnecessary) in his days. Only some of them will be mentioned in this contribution.

The economic changes

First, the on and off arguments and wars between the country of Lilliput and Blefuscu described in the story resemble problems and wars between England and Holland in the 17th century when they fought for the control over colonial and commercial interests. Oliver Cromwell, who united the Scotland, Ireland and England in one country, was in charge of these fights as he edited the act on importing the goods to England on exclusively English ships. The act included the exception about the products of certain country origin; they must have been shipped on the particular country ferries. This Cromwell's deed definitely harmed Dutch merchants' business interests. The issue led to the England-Netherlands war. Also the second part of the book supports the affection in fighting when Gulliver talks to the king of Brobdingnag offering him gunpowder.

Second, the Cromwell military activities in Ireland within 1649 and 1653 when he left the country thoroughly devastated are pictured on the example of Balnibari inhabitants who shut their minds to ordinary life. They consciously neglected their farms and houses – images of their spiritual level. At that time, Charles I was executed and the Civil War in England was over but the rebellion in Ireland was in the progress.

Third, the peaceful and flourishing life in the kingdom of Brobdingnag, finds the parallel in the warless period after 1713 in England (after the Queen Anne's War 1702 – 1713, a part of War of the Spanish Succession, between England and France). At the beginning of Gulliver's new adventures in this land, he found himself in a field of gigantic wheat. And this disproportion seems to glorify human ability to grow farming plants to feed fellows. Those days, Great Britain disposed of the significant power in the world although it lost some colonies in North America. This era of prosperity also enables the growth of population, establishing new farms, different eating habits, formation of new jobs. Some professions gradually gained prestigious position in the hierarchy of society. Good example of this phenomenon can be seen in the legislative power of judges who manipulated public opinion. The absolute power corrupted their minds and led to bribery, greed and murders. Later on, in 1770's the industrial revolution started and the technology and economic progress had an enormous impact on economic conditions of the contemporary society (e.g. railway, steam power, textile manufactures). [3]

The social and cultural influence

First, the English-Dutch war brought some cultural influence. The consequence of the situation described above was spreading a new vocabulary into the languages (e.g. an anchor from Dutch *anker*, a boss from Dutch *baas*); inhabitants of both countries got to know more about the cultural life of the other country for they happened to be there due to fights and needed to acquire another society's conventions, rules, values and at the same time these were modified by the second country culture. Another aspect of the war was that people were forced to seek exile and they again spread their own culture in various countries.

Second, the fire in the Empress' parts of palace in the first book of Gulliver's Travels reminds of the Great Fire of London in 1666 during the reign of Charles II (a son of Charles I and reigned after Oliver Cromwell's death and supported the scientific research and arts). The fire had been fought against for several days as there was no Fire Brigade at that time. This disaster in London resulted in a huge evacuation. Many people suddenly became homeless and were often left without any money. The destructive impact of the Great Fire positively influenced the new design of London – former wooden houses were replaced by brick ones, streets were broadened, new religious buildings were constructed according to the designs of Christopher Wren (e.g. St. Paul's Cathedral). Apart from a new and safer look of London, the fire helped the city to get rid of rats which caused the Great Plague a year before. Refugees from the Second Anglo-Dutch War (French, Dutch) were suspected of setting the fire as revenge. Charles II had the monument reminding of the Great Fire of London built. The sight gave name to one of the underground station "Monument" (District, Circle line).

Third, after leaving home again, Gulliver travelled to the island called Laputa. The Laputians could not concentrate on conversations for a long time as they thought constantly about music and mathematics. Therefore they kept a so-called flapper to give them a flap over their eyes, ears or mouths to bring them back to see, listen or speak. This symbolizes the age of Enlightenment, a philosophical era inspired by antiquity and humanism, when one's main concerns were liberty, democracy, human rights, morality etc. *"When they meet an acquaintance in the morning, the first question is about the sun's health, how he looked at his setting and rising, and what hopes they have to avoid the stroke of the approaching comet."*¹ Also a lot of old traditions and morals were questioned if it was worth using them in the future. [2]

Fourth, the Balnibarrians employed themselves in many peculiar experiments in the Grand Academy; e.g. extracting sun rays from cucumbers, starting build-

¹Swift, Jonathan: Gulliver's travels, Penguin Books, 1994, p. 178

ding houses from roof and so on. This passage reflects technical progress at that time, establishing the Royal Society in 1660 by Charles II who contributed a lot to a scientific and cultural life. . Famous men like Isaac Newton and Christopher Wren were its members. [4]

The last part depicts English efforts to get hold of new countries and gain more power in the world. Gulliver says he always carries some trinkets on him to have something to give native inhabitants in order to win their trust and not to get hurt. This aspiration points out the enormous ambition to rule the world.

Conclusion

Swift's book is a bitter timeless satire of human ignorance, pride, vanity, madness, foolishness and greed. In the characters of the book we can observe crookedness, corruptness and immorality of humans of all ages which makes the book particularly topical.

Reference

- [1] SWIFT, J. *Gulliver's Travels*. London : Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.
- [2] CARTER, R.; McRAE, J. *The Penguin Guide to English Literature: Britain and Ireland*. Penguin Books, 1996. ISBN-13: 978-0140815955.
- [3] CANNON, J.; GRIFFITHS, R. *The Oxford illustrated history of the British Monarchy*. Oxford University Press, 1988. ISBN 0198227868.
- [4] HAIGH, Ch. (ed.). *The Cambridge Historical Encyclopedia of Great Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1985. ISBN 0521255597.

Kontaktní adresa:

Mgr. Jindřiška Šulistová, Katedra cizích jazyků, Vysoká škola technická a ekonomická v Českých Budějovicích, Okružní 10, 370 01 České Budějovice, e-mail: 4014@mail.vstecb.cz