

Abhinav K. Sharma

Ms. Small

Humanities

6 December 2023

### The Technical and Rhetorical Variation of Satires Addressing Social Issues

In the struggle for sociopolitical change, satire has acted as a crucial tool for encapsulating, communicating, and refuting societal norms and philosophies. The act of using sharp literary wit and argumentation to attack some object, whether an individual, group, or idea, easily draws the reader's attention to the broader systematic vices being belittled. Two considerable examples of satirical pieces that embody these goals are *A Modest Proposal* by John Swift, and a piece whose title pays homage to this famous and long-enduring satire, *A Modest Proposal for the Museum of the Plains White Person* by Rayna Green. The former piece enumerates a meticulous plan to turn infants into highly fruitful economic resources by harvesting them for food, clothing, and other goods. Swift discusses at length the numerous socioeconomic benefits that such a course of action would incur. Indeed, after having been ignored time and time again when making genuine policy proposals to help improve conditions in early eighteenth-century Ireland, Swift was left feeling disgruntled, culminating in his creation of this piece. Meanwhile, Rayna Green is a writer famous for being a proponent of Native American rights. Having spent much of her life arguing for equity in education, the return of Native grave sites, and other rights, Green wrote her piece with Native American-United States relations in mind. Her piece suggests the construction of a museum in honor of White culture. Whether it be the dynamics of British rule in Ireland, or the impacts of American settler-colonialism, Swift and Green cover topics at the societal level. The question, however, is

the means by which either author employs language and rhetoric, and how they differ from and align with one another therein. Both Swift and Greene identify an out-group to chastise, and both employ techniques that utilize contradiction, however, the two pieces diverge in that Swift harshly thrashes the Irish, the elite, and other groups he resents, using verbal irony with an overall tone of scholarly sarcasm, whereas Green patronizes the Americans with language that is comparatively tender, using reversal techniques with an overall tone that is less adorned.

Although Swift and Green both attack the respective groups of society whom they resent, Swift treats the Irish, the elites, and his other targets in a dehumanizing manner, while Green is comparatively merciful to the Americans, using tactics of condescension. When performing a pseudo-statistical analysis of the demographics of early eighteenth-century Ireland, Swift calculates that “there may be about two hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders...” (Swift 3). Proceeding and following this comment are other mathematical deductions and observations surrounding these so-called “breeders”. This term, which is consistently embedded within this logos, is typically used to describe reproduction among animals. Thus, describing the Irish public as “breeders” renders them subhuman individuals. Furthermore, this label suggests that the Irish masses lack discretion in reproduction. This presumption serves as a fine base for Swift to construct his Malthusianistic argument. Additionally, the dehumanizing language noticeably escalates. Earlier, Swift describes children coming from “dams,” and later, he uses the term “savage”. Swift is not only cruel in his verbal carnage, but also with the intentions of his humble proposal. One of the benefits of cannibalism Swift cites is that it will “greatly lessen the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly over-run, being the principal breeders of the nation, as well as our most dangerous enemies...” (Swift 8). In describing Ireland as “over-run” by Catholics, Swift implies that this group is a threatening pathogen. He levels highly antagonistic

language at Catholics, calling them “dangerous enemies.” Reducing a certain population due to prejudice, especially through the gruesome means that Swift suggests is unequivocally cruel. Thus, in both his language and intentions, Swift ruthlessly thrashes the Irish and his other targets. By contrast, Green’s cruelty is more implicit, as she makes lesser use of labels, and instead harnesses patronizing language. By design, a museum breaks down and analyzes the components of an exhibit. The artifacts therein are objects, but they are objects of great value. When this design is applied to an entire group of people, especially one that is marginalized, this renders individuals of that group as exotic objects worthy of observation. This creates a dynamic between the observer and object, where the observer is a benevolent superior, that is, a figure of patronization. Thus, as Green describes her idea of a museum, it can be expected that her language will patronize the Americans. Green delivers on these expectations, excitedly explaining how the museum will “have several exhibits about their strange but wonderful customs” (Green 2). The term “strange” embodies the sense of awe the Native observer feels about the objectified American in its exhibit. It is clear that the Native is superior, as they are able to call the American exhibit weird. Being immediately followed by the word “wonderful”, it is clear that there the Americans, while not directly insulted, are patronized and objectified. These ideas continue to build as Green further describes specific exhibits, including “a typical chieftain's three-piece suit and briefcase, a medicine man’s stethoscope, and a Barbie shaman’s spike heels and bikini underpants...” (Green 2). The use of “chieftain” and “shaman” continues the trend of patronizing language. Moreover, in providing a plain description of these objects, a sort of reductionism of certain aspects of American culture is achieved. Therefore, whereas Swift treats the Irish and his other targets with caustic cruelty, Green employs condescension.

At a more technical level, while Swift and Green both implement techniques that exploit

opposition, Swift weaponizes verbal irony, coupled with an overarching tone of intellectual wit, whereas Green maintains a maturer tone, instead weaponizing reversal. After singing the praises of cannibalism, Swift, like any good debater, addresses possible rebuttals. He confidently dismisses other alternatives, stating, "...let no man talk to me of other expedients: Of taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound... of introducing a vein of parsimony... [nor] of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy..." (Swift 11). Swift purposefully lists these alternatives, as he truly believes these ideas, and wants the reader to as well. By juxtaposing his solution, one that he knows will appear ridiculous to the reader, with these alternatives, ones which he knows will appear comparatively reasonable, he hopes to convince the reader to support his specific set of political and economic beliefs. In other words, Swift aims to convince his audience using verbal irony. This creates a sarcastic tone in the piece. This is only furthered by Swift's use of citations. Once more, like any scrupulous debater, Swift cites his sources. When initially introducing his modest proposal, Swift states, "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young, healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food..." (Swift 4). He later references an "eminent French physician" (Swift 5). The use of extreme words such as "assure", "very knowing", "eminent", and "most" serve to ironically exaggerate Swift's ethos. Indeed, with the Americans being unpopular in the British Isles, to the Irish or British reader, "a very knowing American" would appear to be an oxymoron. Moreover, in using these extreme terms, it almost seems as if the persona of the satire is self-aware, and that they know that they must provide evidence to support their argument. Thus, in obliging under this framework of self-awareness, an additional layer of dry sarcasm is added to the piece. This use of verbal irony and witty tone is contrasted by Green's use of reversal and comparatively mature tone. The entire piece is riddled

with instances of reversal. Initially when discussing the museum, Green describes that “...Indian backhoes are excavating the sadly abandoned white cemeteries... We have, through our powers of eminent domain, acquired at least eighty percent of the white cemeteries...” (Green 1). This is a clear example of reversal. In reality, American settler-colonialism, among other devastating consequences, has led to the destruction of Native graves. In order to draw attention to these challenges, Green swaps the position of a few words. In theory, this inaccuracy would shock the reader, thus eliciting greater interest in the topic, and eventually, as Green intends, the sympathy of the reader to the Native American plight. Towards the end of the piece, Green uses reversal a bit more antagonistically. She writes, “...we will be assembling a stellar and major collection of items of costume associated with their centuries-old significant, though puzzling, form of ritual behavior called ‘playing Indian’” (Green 2). Indeed, there has been a history of Americans dressing up as Native American as a means of mocking them. In treating this act of mockery as savage and peculiar, Green sort of completes the circle of reversal. The Americans and their practices, particularly ones oppressive to the marginalized group like Native Americans, are now contextualized. In declaring mockery as a savage behavior, Green implicitly posits that labeling groups as savage and being oppressive in of itself is an act of savagery. Though convoluted through the use of reversal, using a series of elaborate layers of logic, Green is attempting to gain the reader’s sympathy with respect to the struggles Native Americans are facing with regards to losing access to their graves, as well as having their rights stripped. Therefore, in addition to using reversal as opposed to verbal irony, through the use of less direct language, in particular, fewer labels, Green achieves a maturer, less caustic and sarcastic tone than Swift.

Both Swift and Greene target a group of society with whom they take issue with, and both utilize tools that rely on opposition, however, while Swift harshly thrashes the Irish and his

other targets, using verbal irony with an overall tone of professional wit, Green, by contrast, condescends the Americans with gentler words and less direct techniques, using reversal with an overall less sarcastic tone. Understanding the different techniques utilized in two different pieces of satire is an intriguing exercise capable of revealing the possible impacts the reader might experience, and in turn, how society may be altered.