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A MODEST DISCUSSION

Of discussing the effectiveness of the rhetorical devices, logical fallacies, and satirical strategies Dr. Jonathan Swift uses this in his essay titled “A Modest Proposal” for the poor children in Ireland published in 1729.

Imagine you're living in Dublin, Ireland in the mid 1720s, as a rich landowner. The family you rent out to does not have enough money to pay you; however, there is one solution: you ask to buy their children and eat them or employ them. What are the pros and cons? You can have a free work force and a meal, as well as new material for leather and clothing. So, would you do it?

In writing “A Modest Proposal” Swift suggests an ironic solution to make the starving children of Ireland useful in solving the problem of hunger and poverty. By utilizing reduction of the poor children, and appeals to logos, pathos, and ethos, Swift creates a persona to help him justify this absurd proposal, persuade the reader his proposal is the best option, makes himself appear more credible, and causes the reader to realize they have contributed to the problem by even slightly agreeing with some of Swift’s points since they are absurd. This piece is satire, and Swift is trying to bring attention to the problem of poverty in Ireland at the time by creating such a ridiculous solution that cannot be fathomable. The situational irony of this is that most people who could read his proposal must be educated and most likely a British citizen living in Ireland; and these richer, more privileged people inherently contributed to the problem of poverty, hunger, and diseases associated with the poorer Irish cast by being the landlords that raised the rent. He is using this satire as a way to bring awareness to the current treatment of the non-British, originally Irish people who have moved to larger cities like Dublin after they’re land was bought by landlords and they’re ill treatment was directly caused by their landlords.

Through the use of ethos, logos, and logical fallacies, Swift effectively explains his proposal and flaws of Irish society, and accounts for any opposing arguments or questions to make the argument seem logically sound and he also makes the reader indirectly feel as if they caused the problem. After introducing the current issue in Ireland with the children of the poor people and explaining how they are a burden to society, Swift explains that the best way to handle the newborns is by eating them. He justifies this absurd proposal by citing a credible acquaintance, appealing to the reader's sense of ethos by describing how he has "been assured by a very knowing American of [his] acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled" (Swift lines 58-61). After this piece of evidence, Swift goes on to explain how he believes the best time for families to sell their child is when they are a year old, because of how plump and delicious the flesh tends to be at that time. However, the reader never discovers who Swift's "very knowing American" is, even though he is mentioned at a later time again. If this "very knowing American" believes that babies are delicious when prepped in any way, then babies must be delicious, no say against it. Swift takes this evidence and uses it to justify further how the babies will be "somewhat dear, and therefore very proper to landlords" (line 76-77), since such a delicacy as babies should be for the rich and noble. This also pokes at the reader and crosses a line of consent for them. This reader is most likely a literate, upper-class, British citizen who most likely is a landlord or has someone in their family who is a landlord for the Irish. Discussing babies as foods for this reader has to be repulsive and disgusting for them, which can make the reader feel disgusted with themselves and the issue if they're cannot be a better solution to poverty. Additionally, Swift's referrals to someone else is a logical fallacy called appeal to authority. Swift's argument requires validation from his American colleague, however just because he has support doesn't mean the reader should fully believe everything he says. Additionally, the situational irony and antithesis Swift also uses when referring to this American is something the reader should notice. At the time in the 1700s when this piece was written, the United Kingdom looked down on the Americans and saw them as distasteful, so it is interesting to use an American as backup when talking about the taste of babies. This juxtaposition of American distastefulness and the taste of

children is contradictory, since most people would not view one single account of baby meat as fully reliable, but Swift's persona treats this account very reliable. Using appeals to ethos and authority, as well as irony, Swift persuades the reader about how credible he can be by creating a knowledgeable voice, which adds to this satire.

Another appeal to ethos and logos is when Swift cites numerous numbers and information and gives financial evidence, in terms of cost and profit to show that his plan is the best. He uses financial information because most of his audience are educated, and a large portion may be landlords or business owners who can understand and are attracted by numbers and profits. So, Swift calculates how many children and "breeders" there are currently in the country by calculating it on his own:

About two hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders; from which number I subtract thirty thousand couple, who are able to maintain their own child (although I apprehend there cannot be so many, under the present distresses of the kingdom) but this being granted, there will remain a hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the year. There only remain a hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born. (Swift lines 33-39)

Swift appeals to the reader's logos because of these numbers since it shows that Swift has thoroughly calculated the costs and it is shown when he took the time to factor multiple things in, such as disease, miscarries, or current people who can care for their own child. Additionally, he calculates how financially conscious and valuable his proposal is, again appealing to logos and providing seemingly good evidence for the reader. He estimated that it costs about two shillings per year to raise a beggar's child to the age of one, and he also predicted that any "fine noble" would pay an average of 10 shillings for the child, as they are able to get four meals out of the fine delicacy. He then calculates that each mother "will have eight shillings neat profit and be fit for work till she produces another child" (Swift lines 92-93). He only furthers his convincing argument by discussing how "the money will circulate among ourselves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture" (Swift lines 156-157). These "goods" refer to

the articles of clothing that can be used with the skin of the children, as well as how any of the children older than 6 years of age can be used to “employ them in handicraft or agriculture... [to] build houses... [and] cultivate land” (Swift lines 43-45). Swift appeals to the reader’s logos by adding quantitative impacts and numbers to show how beneficial this proposal is to the people of Ireland. Swift is able to use logos (which appeals to the reader’s reasoning skills through the use of logical facts, such as numbers) to justify and argue for his solution. Even though Swift is writing a satire and isn’t actually able to convince the people of Ireland to eat the beggar’s children, he is able to justify and argue correctly by using logos. Other simple ideas can be argued for using the same techniques. So, Swift can show anyone that ideas can be easily argued for by using logos and facts that make the idea more attainable and realistic, as well as using the proposed benefits as a major selling point.

Lastly, a satirical strategy that Swift uses reduction, comparing the children of the poor to animals when talking about numbers and reservations, to dehumanize the beggars and their children to justify that the proposal isn’t cruel or inhumane. Reducing the cruelty makes the satire more effective because it makes the reader realize that if they do believe or even find parts of the proposal justifiable, they are part of the problem since they find themselves agreeing with Swift. One example of this is when he says that they are allowing 20,000 of the children to be “reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine” (Swift lines 63-65). The juxtaposition of the children being referred to as breeders and being mentioned and compared with livestock implies that these children are not actually people, more of a food source like animals. He also calls the mothers of said children breeders multiple times. Swift discusses the children as if they are not humans and more like livestock, and another example of this is when he uses terms normally used for livestock and applies them to children of the poor and the parents. He uses the term “dam” – which is a general term used to refer to the mother of an infant animal, like the mother of a calf or a lamb– when he discusses how “a child just dropped from its dam, may be supported by her milk” (Swift lines 21-22). He reduces the poor people by referring and treating them as animals, maybe to imply less guilt about eating

the children as many people eat livestock's meat, even though his true purpose isn't wanting people to start eating the children. He wants to raise awareness and call for action because if his audience even slightly agree with that these poor people are like animals, they are part of the problem since it is inhumane and cruel to think of people in that manner. The reduction also works to show the unimportance of the poor people and their children, as they are only a source for food. This works to persuade the reader that this absurd idea is agreeable in some aspect since they are most likely an upper class citizen, since Swift draws the connection that the poor people of Ireland are like animals and the richer people of Ireland are much more superior. This conclusion works to convey a message that appeals to a certain audience that may be more well-off than the regular person in Ireland, which can also help the richer people see a problem in the treatment of the poor.

The voice Swift creates for himself, and the character he portrays to this writing makes him seem as credible and logical, as the extent to which he thinks the plan out is of the utmost detail. The amount of detail he puts in by calculating numbers and creating a sustainable cycle of utilizing the children for food, labor, clothing, breeding etc., appeals to both the reader's logos and ethos. He also utilizes reduction to make his proposal more plausible, since the devaluation of the poor people makes his proposal more reasonable and palatable. Lastly, the situational irony as well as appeals to authority used by Swift make the absurd satirical proposal more convincing, and his techniques effectively support his solution, something that can be applied today when the correct logical strategies are used. Overall, his satire uses all the devices to cause the reader to agree in some points with Swift and that hopefully helps the reader conclude that they are also contributing to the mistreatment of poor Irish people by not accepting that the treatment the poor receive from society, the government, and landlords is unfair and cruel.