

Anika Sivasankar

Mrs. Small

Humanities

13 December 2024

### Satirical Analysis on “A Modest Proposal”

During the 18th century, under British rule, the country of Ireland was facing immense levels of poverty, leading to starvation in many of the individuals. The reason for the levels of poverty spiking during this time period was because of the extreme taxation of the British on the Irish people, as well as high rent, oppressive trade restrictions, new economic policies, and overall overpopulation. Jonathan Swift, an Angle-Irish poet who was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland, wrote an essay called *A Modest Proposal* during the Age of Reason; this essay critiques the exploitation of Ireland by the British government and wealthy landlords, through the use of various satirical devices. Here, the British government and rich landlords are taking almost everything from the poor Irish people, leaving them to starve. Swift’s dark and Horatian satire, pretending to propose the consumption of infants as a solution to overpopulation and poverty, criticizes and mocks how the ruling class viewed the poor Irish people as something as small as disposable commodities. Published anonymously, but still widely recognized as Swift’s work, “A Modest Proposal” uses satirical devices like irony, exaggeration, and imagery to provoke a sense of outrage in the readers and allows for the readers to reflect on the British exploitation of the Irish people.

Swift starts “A Modest Proposal” by painting a very vivid and heartbreaking picture of Ireland’s state of poverty. He describes the Irish streets and countryside filled with beggars and their children. In the text, Swift says, “These mothers, instead of being able to work for their

honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants” (Swift). In this quote, Swift shows the state of desperation the Irish people experienced during this time of poverty. He uses a very calm and rational tone while talking about the economic burden these families are going through. But this paves the way for the absurdity of his proposal that he gives later on in his essay. The satirical device that Swift employs here is irony, as he presents himself to the readers as a logical economist who means well, and then addresses the poverty situation the Irish people are in. His calm and logical tone makes his next point even more shocking, adding to the satirical element of the proposal.

The main point of Swift’s satire is conveyed when he starts talking about his proposal, which is quite shocking to the reader: the poor should sell their infants as food for the wealthy. Something that is quite disturbing is the very practical tone with which he presents this idea., with his extremely rational heartless, and logical tone. He says, “I have been assured by a very knowing American... that a young healthy child well nursed is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food” (Swift). The level of absurdity that “A Modest Proposal” reaches is taken even further when Swift starts to exaggerate the benefits of this “solution,” his idea to “eat the babies”. He claims that it would provide poor families with income, as well as offer the wealthy a new delicacy. Swift tries to get the reader to agree with him, This exaggeration is taken a step forward when he starts to break down portion sizes, recipes, and preparation methods using the children, in a lot of detail. Swift writes, “A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends” (Swift). Swift also writes, “I have reckoned upon a medium, that a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and in a solar year, if tolerably nursed, increase to 28 pounds” (Swift). Here, Swift uses a “fake” appeal to logos, meaning that he is trying to use logic, with the measurements, to back up the idea that consuming babies is a very

feasible solution. The reason that this appeal to logos is “fake” is because he doesn’t actually think this is a feasible solution, he is just mocking the idea that it is. Therefore, it can be seen that Swift starts to use satirical devices like exaggeration, and appeals to logos to get the reader to understand and agree with the point that he is trying to make, that “babies should be eaten.” But in reality, the absurdity of his essay is trying to mock this idea, and trying to get the reader to understand that he doesn’t actually mean that.

After this, Swift then builds on his proposal’s argument by addressing any kinds of possible objections, as well as emphasizing the “benefits” of his overall proposal. Swift claims that by eating children, parents would value their children as profitable items. He means this when he says, “Men would become as fond of their wives during the time of their pregnancy as they are now of their mares in foal” (Swift 5). He uses this absurd level of imagery as he describes the mothers breeding their children for profit. And this leads to the landlords eating the children of their tenants. These very gross and “unappealing” images are created by Swift to shock readers, appealing to pathos, the emotions of the readers, in the hopes to get the readers to understand how unethical this solution is, and to bring awareness to this economic issue the Irish people are under. This also shows the dehumanization behind British policies toward Ireland, which represents the satirical device “reduction”. Reduction is a device that seems to be widely used throughout this entire essay, as Swift talks about using the babies as food and eating them, describing them as merely on the same level as food. This is to help elaborate on the fact that the higher-ups view the Irish people as mere objects, something they can easily manipulate and take advantage of.

Overall, Swift’s piece works well because he uses imagery, irony, and appeals to both emotion (pathos) and logic (logos) to criticize how the rich higher-ups exploit the poor in

Ireland. His descriptions create very shocking and disturbing images that force readers to see how cruel and inhumane the situation is. The irony in suggesting such a horrifying solution as if it's reasonable makes the higher-ups' treatment of the Irish seem ridiculous and heartless. By appealing to pathos, Swift makes readers feel a sense of sympathy for the suffering that the Irish people went through, while his appeal to logos mimics how the rich justify their actions with logic but no sense of compassion. These satirical tools work together to make readers understand the problem in the hopes of rethinking their views on the issue.

Works Cited

Swift, Jonathan. "A Modest Proposal." 1729.