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Calculated Cruelty: How Swift Uses Logic to Expose Society's Moral Failures

Throughout history, influential figures, particularly politicians and prominent government officials, have faced lasting difficulties like famine and inflation. In response to this, they tend to consider objective statistics and mathematical reasoning, especially during a period like the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a time of intellectual awakening in history when scientific reasoning dominated religious faith. Therefore, scientific reasoning was applied to solve sensitive societal issues, resulting in rational, yet immoral decisions. In British-controlled Ireland, the Irish population suffered under oppressive English trade restrictions and devastating famines that left families starving while English policymakers debated solutions through cold economic calculus. Through his satire “A Modest Proposal”, Irish writer and essayist Jonathan Swift utilizes a satirical persona to propose that people should consume babies as it would reduce the toll on impoverished families, utilizing a variation of satirical techniques to bolster his argument. Furthermore, in his satire, Jonathan Swift's persona utilizes appeals to logos, dark language, and a combination of verbal and situational irony to characterize not only Ireland's economic inequality but to also characterize society as ruthless to comment on Ireland's lack of moral conscience when making sensitive social decisions during adversity.

Through the appeal to logos, Swift's persona justifies his unscrupulous proposals to appeal to the audience while shining light on how Ireland objectively views societal problems. His persona first calculates that “there may be about two hundred thousand couple whose wives

are breeders” (Swift 33-34). By looking at wives in society as breeders and non-breeders, Swift's satirical persona categorically approaches this problem in order to best determine the feasibility of his idea, making a broad assumption that wives would want to sell their babies for profit. To add on to his calculations, he accounts for confounding variables, saying, “I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry,...There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born” (Swift 35-37). He then ends his statement by asking a rhetorical question to the general public to provoke thought, saying, “The question therefore is, how this number shall be reared, and provided for?” (Swift 33-40). By using pure mathematics to describe the problem, Swift's persona not only describes Ireland's crisis effectively, but also how their economic inequality reduces women to mere livestock and treats them as an “inventory” problem. By using phrases such as “I calculate” and “therefore, is...”, his persona looks at this problem through an overly objective lens without considering the morality of any decisions he is making. The subtraction also showcases the emotional detachment from human suffering and neutral problem solving. However, his reasoning has many gaps. In fact, in his argument, Swift's persona leaves out many important details such as the cause of poverty and Britain's harsh land policies. In doing so, the persona mimics how Britain overly focuses on extinguishing the poor but not the reason behind the poverty's abundance. Furthermore, the persona uses mathematical reasoning to not only showcase the inequality Ireland tries to ignore, but also how rational frameworks can justify sinful decisions.

Building upon his calculation, his persona uses dark language to mimic the types of proposals the British government makes, critiquing their unethical nature. The persona describes how “infant's flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March...there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent” (Swift 79-82).

Swift's satirical persona goes to propose a reason to eat babies through this dark language. His persona describes infant flesh analogous to how seasonal crops are described: there are certain periods when flesh is scarce compared to when they are plentiful. Additionally, the reference to Catholic Lent deepens this dehumanization, serving to convey how religious observation is merely a breeding schedule that affects infant supply. Through the use of phrases such as “in season”, he describes babies as seasonal commodities, dehumanizing them to a product necessary for survival. For example, Swift's persona recommends people to “[buy] the children alive, and [dress] them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs” (Swift 99-100). However, his persona's proposal does not stop at the consumption of babies, adding that “the skin of which [babies], artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen” (Swift 95-96). By applying cold, practical, and economic vocabulary to children, the persona exposes how the Irish government adopted this perspective in governmental debates. Swift's satirical persona's dark language, overall, forces readers to confront an uncomfortable truth: when using mathematics to solve societal problems, the gap between economic planning and societal chaos becomes disturbingly small.

Finally, Swift's satirical persona uses verbal and situational irony to mimic the false objectivity Irish governments utilized to convince the greater population. His persona explains his intentions, saying, “I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country” (Swift 234-236). The persona ironically positions himself as a rational policy-maker who stands with the common good in this case. However, the irony lies in the horrific nature of the proposals his persona makes compared to his positioned innocence. Through using phrases such as “I profess, in the sincerity of my heart”, he is trying to establish

ethos by claiming his motivations are as pure and honest as himself. Swift's persona also uses images such as the heart to appeal to pathos by evoking the feeling of emotional honesty and trustworthiness. The persona further solidifies this stance by dismissing actual socio-economic problems as unrealistic, arguing "Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients:....Of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants" (Swift 192-201). The persona claims to seek the "public good" while rejecting mercy as a viable solution, dramatically contradicting the persona's words with their actions. The persona then attempts to validate his cruelty through the relief of victims when they appear delighted to sell their infants, saying that parents "would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been sold for food at a year old... and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes" (Swift 227-230). Swift's persona supports his argument by citing the satisfaction of parents in committing a heinous crime, presenting it as logical "mercy" to avoid the "oppression of landlords". As a result, his persona mimics the way the British-controlled Irish governments gained the trust of millions through false objectivity.

Overall, in his satire "A Modest Proposal", Jonathan Swift's satirical persona was able to mimic and satirize the Irish government through the use of logos, dark language, and dramatic irony. Furthermore, his persona's satire exposes the dark truth behind Irish governments: when rational calculations begin to replace moral reasoning, societies can easily justify cruelty. During a time of absolute turmoil, Swift's persona's exaggerated, but logical statements indirectly reveal how the Irish government reduces humans down to statistical figures. Therefore, his work reminds us that even during tough times, true solutions to inequality require not just rational analysis but the commitment to viewing humans as compassionate people rather than saleable commodities.

Works Cited

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