

Dasha Vo

Ms. Small

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Critiquing Human Exceptionalism/Speciesism Through Satire

Humans have experienced all kinds of injustice and prejudice in their lives. Maybe some more than others, but most people are exposed to it within their lifetime. This is mainly thought to occur from human to human. However, what if people actually inflict injustice and prejudice onto something else entirely in our day to day lives? Human exceptionalism is the idea that “humans are unique, distinctive beings that ought to be assigned a fundamental moral value in accordance with that distinctiveness” (Henriques 2025). Simply put, it’s the idea that humans are uniquely superior to other forms of life. This can also be referred to as speciesism, the idea that humans are the most superior species. Now to some, that is the obvious conclusion. But is it really that simple of a question? Does an animal, like a monkey, who has thoughts, emotions, and a life just like a human, really deserve to be enslaved or killed at our hands? This debate coined the term, “human exceptionalism” and those that would answer yes to those questions, are considered human exceptionalists. The texts, “Speciesism, like racism, imperils humanity and the planet,” an article from *Berkeley News* by Robert Sanders, and “Babycakes,” an independent story by Neil Gaiman, both explore this topic, and critique human exceptionalism. However, while the former is an informational article, the latter is a satirical piece, and one is much more effective than the other. To explain using the famous saying, “show not tell,” Robert Sanders essentially does more

“telling” while Neil Gaiman does more “showing.” So, although the article “Speciesism, like racism, imperils humanity and the planet” appeals to logos and pathos in order to critique human exceptionalism, “Babycakes” does this more effectively through satirical reduction, and the emotionless tone paired with disturbing imagery.

Neil Gaiman’s “Babycakes” more effectively exposes human hypocrisy through satirical reduction than does the Berkeley article does through its logical appeals. Gaiman approaches this by presenting a society that raises a human infant exactly as animals are raised for food, which reduces the value of babies to be on the same level as any animal. This is clearly shown on page 1 of “Babycakes,” where it states, “Babies can’t talk. They can hardly move. A baby is not a rational, thinking creature” (Gaiman). This reduction is effective because it relates to animals, and by comparing babies to animals, it shows the horror in the actions humans commit against animals. It makes the reader consider that since it’s so horrible to do these things to babies, why isn’t it also horrible to do these things to other forms of life? In contrast, the Berkeley article relies on a logical appeal, claiming that “We’re not arguing that humans are not important. We’re just saying they’re only one of many of the life forms at the tips of the tree of life” (Sanders). While this logically explains the problem, it allows readers to remain detached and leaves room for debate. The logic is not absolute, and thus fails to completely convince the reader of the issue. On the other hand, Gaiman’s reduction causes the reader to recognize the horror of human behavior directly, making the hypocrisy impossible to debate. As a result, Babycakes is more effective because it transforms the argument into an undeniably unethical scenario, where readers are forced to face the problems and hypocrisy within exceptionalism.

While “Babycakes” uses a cold, emotionless tone and disturbing imagery to deepen its critique of human behavior, the Berkeley article fails to create a universal appeal to the audience’s sense of guilt. Gaiman’s calm, and emotionless descriptions of the baby’s treatment mirror the language often used to describe livestock (which also relates back to the reduction to animals), making the cruelty feel normalized and routine. This is shown on page 1 of “Babycakes,” where it says, “We scarred them and scalded them. We burned them. We clamped them and planted electrodes into their brains. We grafted, and we froze and we irradiated” (Gaiman). This horrible depiction creates an image in readers minds of just how terrible human behavior is. The calm tone while describing this imagery represents the same attitude humans have towards their brutal actions on animals, which demonstrates the hypocrisy of real human behavior because while the reader recognizes the undeniable cruelty of acting this way towards babies, many fail to recognize how cruel it is to act this way towards animals. This hypocrisy is thus brought to light. By comparison, the Berkeley article appeals to pathos by saying, “races are to racism as species are to speciesism” (Sanders). This emphasizes that speciesism (or exceptionalism) is just another form of discrimination against a life form, and that discrimination against animals is no different than discrimination against humans. Readers may feel a sense of guilt, as those who have been discriminated against know the pain of it, and likely wouldn’t want to inflict that pain upon anyone or anything else. However, there is still room for debate as there is no direct comparison or implication towards the reader, because not all experience racism, so this sense of guilt may be lost on some. Whereas Gaiman’s tone and imagery personalizes the situation, forcing readers to recognize their hypocrisy and imagine a

human victim rather than conceptual harm. The harm of a baby is one that people are much more likely to feel connected to compared to racism. So, although the appeal to guilt from “Speciesism, like racism, imperils humanity and the planet,” is effective, “Babycakes” is more so, due to its the tone and imagery that causes the reader to recognize the hypocrisy in their behavior toward animals.

In conclusion, the satirical approach of “Babycakes” is more effective than the informational approach of “Speciesism, like racism, imperils humanity and the planet,” because the reduction and emotionless tone creates a more powerful critique on human exceptionalism than the appeals to logos and pathos. Gaiman’s clear comparison between babies and animals blurs the line of superiority between lifeforms, and makes readers question human treatment of animals. This implication of the reader creates a deeper understanding of the issue compared to the factual logos and pathos in the Berkeley article, as readers have much less of a personal connection to the text. While Sanders lays out the information to describe why exceptionalism and speciesism is bad and how it is hypocritical, Gaiman effectively shows this hypocrisy to readers, and makes them question their own behavior through his satirical devices. In the case of these texts, and many others, a satirical approach can often be more effective due to the deeper understanding that readers get from connecting personally to any given situation or topic. This then causes the reader to reflect on themselves, and works better as a call to action. Therefore, satirical pieces can often be more effective at conveying a message, especially when the author is attempting to inspire emotion or action out of a reader.

Works Cited

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