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Murder is the Solution

The best solution to saving a country from a crippling economy is to embrace cannibalism and eat the children?! When *"A Modest Proposal"* was written, Ireland had been under British control for nearly 500 years. The British imposed several restrictions on Ireland, destroying its economy and plunging the country into poverty. Appalled by the widespread suffering and misery in Ireland, Jonathan Swift sought to provoke the English into action through his satirical proposal in 1729. In the same way, Neil Gaiman produced a disturbing writing piece named *"Babycakes"* in the 21st century. Essentially, he wanted to highlight how humans can be brutal to the environment and are lacking any empathy when it comes to preserving humanity. Despite the differences in time periods and their respective purposes, in *"A Modest Proposal"* by Jonathan Swift and *"Babycakes"* by Neil Gaiman, both authors effectively utilize several satirical strategies to target humanity's disregard for natural resources and expose flaws in society and government.

Although *"Babycakes"* is a more modern take, both satirical pieces encompass similar dark themes and reduction to dehumanize people. The purpose of *"A Modest Proposal"* is essentially to point out flaws in the economy, social hierarchy, and the British government. However, Swift's use of satire suggests an alternate aim: Ireland can reduce poverty and

recover its economy by killing poor children and selling them as food to wealthy English landlords. Throughout the proposal, he is oblivious to the irrationality of the proposed solution; in fact, he portrays the children as the problem, stating how they are a burden to their families and the parents. His solution consists of “dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs” (Swift 99-100). This proposed suggestion reduces children to livestock, equating their value to that of – pigs -- highlighting how they are used as resources for consumption. Although Swift’s satirical persona may suggest that he is promoting the slaughter of children, the true purpose of the text is to criticize the British government for its exploitation of Ireland and scolding the Irish people for not putting any effort to better the worsening conditions of Ireland. Additionally, his overall biting and calm tone, which is seen in the matter-of-fact style of his writing, reflects his bitterness towards the actions of the greedy English, as they continue exploiting Ireland. Similarly, “Babycakes” shares a similar purpose and use of reduction, while intentionally referencing “A Modest Proposal”. Written in a more recent and modern context, the purpose of this satirical piece is to call attention to humans’ exploitation of nature, particularly through animal testing. The writing describes a dystopian society where animals are becoming extinct due to animal testing and exploitation, forcing people to turn to babies as their substitutes. Humans use the most brutal and unethical ways possible when treating animals in the real world, yet there is a lack of any feeling of remorse or guilt. Moreover, Gaiman’s causal tone when referencing the murder of animals and babies through testing, eating, and using them, provides insight on how detached people can get when they are involved in unethical and immoral activities. This is demonstrated throughout the text, when Gaiman uses short sentences that are informally written with low diction, such as “And we used

them” (Gaiman 1). Furthermore, his satirical persona normalizes the horrific actions performed on groups of animals and babies – essentially treating them as objects: “Baby flesh is tender and succulent. We flayed their skin and decorated ourselves in it. Baby leather is soft and comfortable” (Gaiman 1). Gaiman’s use of reduction fully objectifies babies, presenting them as a solution to benefit the economy because they are thought of as commodities. After the animals went extinct, people realized that there was no reason to stop experimentation due to babies not being “rational, thinking creature” (Gaiman). Again, there is a lack of any guilt or remorse regarding the dehumanization and the cruelty that is inflicted upon the animals. Thus, the reduction utilized in “Babycakes” and “A Modest Proposal” is a powerful tool that conveys the purpose of the satire to highlight societal injustices.

Swift’s use of situational irony in the proposal directly exposes the absurdity of his solution and targets England’s economic exploitation of Ireland. He proposes that all babies, specifically Catholic babies, should be sold, killed, and served as food to the wealthy English. This shocking suggestion contrasts drastically with any practical solution that would be expected from a “modest proposal”; for example, he references a point in time where Swift himself attempted to offer practical solutions. However, he’s now tired of the rejections and, “fell upon this proposal, which, as it is wholly new...of no expense and little trouble” (Swift 210-211). This understatement emphasizes the originality and superiority of the proposal as it is unique and doesn’t require the wealthy to give up anything. Simultaneously, it mocks the wealthy’s unwillingness to sacrifice anything to better the conditions of Ireland, highlighting a key trait of the British: dehumanizing. As part of his solution, Jonathan describes, “I have been assured...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 58-60). Swift wrote the proposal because he wanted to save the children from the worsening conditions in Ireland. However, murdering children to reduce poverty in Ireland is not the most humane or moral solution. The irony lies in the fact that his proposed solution is just as disturbing and monstrous as the inhumane policies and conditions that Irish people in poverty are forced to follow. In this piece, Swift describes the consumption of children in a luring, casual tone, as if he were recommending a dish to the wealthy. Thus, the absurdity and the many sickening aspects of his solution – killing the babies and cooking them – contrast again, with the casual, indifferent tone he employs throughout. The rational tone Swift utilizes, combined with the situational irony incorporated in the proposal, exposes the absurdity of his solution and unveils the brutality of England's exploitation of Ireland.

Gaiman's "Babycakes" utilizes imagery and parallelism to attack the societal issue of animal testing, by focusing on the slaughter of animals and babies. The passage describes how animal cruelty and using babies for experimentation is a necessity in human society. And so, without much remorse, people "scarred them and scalded them. We burned them... The babies breathed our smoke, and the babies veins flowed with our medicines and drugs until they stopped breathing or their blood ceased to flow" (Gaiman 1). The imagery present throughout "Babycakes" paints a disturbing picture of the horrible practices the babies and animal groups are forced to endure. This shows how desensitized people are due to the widespread animal testing and cruelty. The parallelism that is prevalent between the babies and the animals, indicates that the exploitation of groups is a constant cycle – it never ends, as once one group such as the animals becomes extinct, people always find a way to continue with another group

– in this case, the babies. So, Gaiman uses parallelism to essentially force readers to question unethical activities like animal testing; if people don't consent to testing on babies, stating that it is unmoral, how is testing on animals any different? The repetitiveness in the practices and the cycle is a sign that humans don't change, no matter how morally wrong their actions are: "just because we didn't have animals anymore, that was no reason to change our lives" (Gaiman 1). Society will continue to abuse and torment other populations with their brutal ways of testing. The idea of animal testing and the exploitation of others challenges societal norms and morals. To conclude, satirical devices such as imagery and parallelism are shown to be successful in conveying the targeted purpose of "Babycakes".

Absurd proposals such as "A Modest Proposal" and "Babycakes" target a specific audience to point out societal problems using satirical devices. Swift's satirical piece was written from an irrational point of view, as it encouraged the mass murder of babies, to target England's legal and economic exploitation of Ireland. Though "Babycakes" originated from a more modern context, Gaiman similarly focuses on highlighting the societal issue of the human tendency to exploit groups in nature.

Works Cited

Gaiman, Neil. *Babycakes*. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2020.

Swift, Jonathan, 1667-1745. *A Modest Proposal*. Champaign, Ill.: Project Gutenberg, 1997.