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Can We Eat Babies? (It's Only Logical)

Historically, human societies have struggled with the systemic injustices that emerge when a dominant group maintains power over another through deliberate exploitation and dehumanization of the oppressed. These power dynamics become especially hazardous when logic and reasoning are applied without moral consideration, enabling those in power to justify cruelty through pseudo-rational arguments that strip away the humanity of those they harm. Two satirical works that explore these injustices are "A Modest Proposal" by Dr. Jonathan Swift and "Babycakes" by Neil Gaiman. Swift's work examines colonial exploitation in 18th-century Ireland, where British economic policies left citizens poverty-stricken and starving while landlords profitably exploited their misery, by proposing Irish children be sold as food to wealthy landlords. Gaiman's story imagines a world devoid of animals where human babies fulfill the roles once served by those creatures, mirroring how modern society continues to exploit animals for food and experimentation while justifying their suffering through the logical fallacy that they are inherently less valuable than humans. In "A Modest Proposal" and "Babycakes," both authors argue that systemic injustice occurs when one group dominates another, exposing the moral perils of prioritizing logical reasoning over empathy; through irony, reduction, and calculated tonal shifts, both authors expose how economic systems commodify life, how intellectual frameworks rationalize cruelty, and how societal complicity normalizes oppression, ultimately demanding radical reform.

A primary argument in both "A Modest Proposal" and "Babycakes" is that economic and societal systems enable the dominating class to treat human life as exploitable resources, which is made through the use of strong appeals to pathos. Both of the pieces reduce humans to objects or livestock to demonstrate the blatant immorality that is seen when profit motives override human dignity. Swift illustrates the tragic position of the Irish public caused by English economic policies, presenting his idea that a boy or girl is "no saleable commodity" after twelve years old (Swift). This reduction of human beings being referred to as objects shows the extremity of the poverty felt by the Irish due to dominant British exploitation, and as a result, demonstrates how this injustice was a direct result of the abuse of power by the British. Swift extends this economic critique by noting that landlords have "already devoured most of the parents" and therefore possess "the best title to the children" (Swift). By using the word "devoured," Swift moves past economics to suggest that the British have consumed the very lives and livelihoods of the Irish through oppressive policies, making the literal consumption of their children a fitting metaphor for their authority. The purpose of this reduction and word choice is to illustrate the utter valuelessness of the Irish in the eyes of a ruling class that is able to view an entire population as a resource to be exhausted. In "Babycakes," Gaiman critiques society's willingness to exploit the vulnerable whenever economically convenient. Gaiman depicts a world where the disappearance of animals leads not to reflection, but to the substitution of human babies to maintain the status quo. This dehumanization is illustrated by describing how society mistreats the weaker group of babies by noting that because "baby leather is soft and comfortable," the people "flayed their skin and decorated [themselves] in it" (Gaiman). The gruesome imagery effectively reduces a sentient human being to a saleable commodity, forcing the reader to confront the unsettling ease with which a dominant group can exploit the oppressed

to serve their own wishes. Gaiman deepens this economic critique by detailing what happens to animals in scientific testing, describing how "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). By substituting humans for animals in this scenario, Gaiman exposes the systematic torture that demand by the dominant group inflicts on creatures deemed expendable, revealing how economic systems justify suffering when profit or convenience hangs in the balance. His use of irony, vivid imagery, and word choice demonstrates how the strong rule that humans have over animals stems directly from viewing them as economic resources rather than equal beings. Both Swift and Gaiman reveal that the systemic injustice seen throughout history is an inevitable consequence of economic systems that treat life as a commodity.

Another key theme that both works demonstrate is that reasoning based purely on logical merit can become a tool of danger to society, exposed through the authors' use of logos, tone, and irony. Both of the pieces utilize cold, calculating thoughts to convey the absurdity that arises when intelligence alone determines worth. Swift satirizes extreme rationality by meticulously reasoning that while the "charge of nursing a beggar's child" is only "two shillings per annum, rags included," the "carcass of a good fat child" would sell for "ten shillings," ultimately leaving the mother with "eight shillings neat profit" and the ability to work until she "produces another child" (Swift). It is obvious that humans cannot be thought of in terms of monetary value, and this superficial appeal to logos shows that regardless of the mathematics behind a claim, it sometimes cannot go into effect due to inherent reasons past logic. Swift reinforces this critique of moral disconnect through absolute adherence to cold logic by calculating that a child will make "two dishes at an entertainment" for friends (Swift). By framing the murder of a child as a practical solution for a dinner party, a solution that is technically logical within a purely

utilitarian outlook, Swift satirically suggests that the British have reduced human life to a logistical problem to be solved, making the consumption of children a natural conclusion of their economic theories. The purpose of these calculations is to illustrate the danger of a ruling class that values efficiency over empathy, revealing how intellectual frameworks can rationalize any atrocity when divorced from moral consideration. Similarly, in "Babycakes," Gaiman critiques the arrogance of human intellect and the dangerous hierarchies it creates when reason alone justifies cruel decisions. Gaiman depicts a world where consumption and scientific testing on infants is rationalized, illustrating this by noting that because "babies can't talk" and are not "rational, thinking" creatures, they are fair game for exploitation (Gaiman). This appeal to logos effectively reduces a human life to its intellectual capacity, exposing how easily logic can be weaponized to invalidate the rights of the voiceless, and overall be used to justify decisions that harm or marginalize others. Gaiman further exposes the danger of this mindset by satirizing the justification for dominance, describing the narrator's belief that being smart makes humans "superior to the animals and the babies" (Gaiman). By presenting intelligence and rationality as the primary metrics for value, Gaiman satirically reveals how the oppressor justifies the position that the "inferior" as existing only to be used. His use of irony and detached tone exposes how the reliance on pure logic leads to the abandonment of morality. Overall, both Swift and Gaiman reveal that the atrocities seen throughout history are often the inevitable consequence of prioritizing rational argument over ethical responsibility, demonstrating that reason without humanity enables systematic cruelty.

A final message in both "A Modest Proposal" and "Babycakes" is that societal involvement in and acceptance of cruelty allow the common man to justify systems of exploitation, which is shown through the powerful use of graphic imagery and satire. In both of

the readings, graphic appeals to pathos are used in attempts to show how societal apathy comes about through the presentation of cruelty as normal. Swift shows how the lack of care about the horrible consequences of societal exploitation can just be shrugged away through his mention that the poor are "every day dying, and rotting, by cold and famine, and filth, and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected" (Swift). Through this, it becomes clear that the society that Swift speaks about has been made completely apathetic about human tragedy, in which the gradual process of exploiting the exploited can be considered an unpleasant but necessary evil that must simply be effectively managed. In further exploration of the societal theme of normalizing exploitation and tragedy through increased apathy, Swift suggests that babies can be bought while still dressed "hot from the knife" (Swift), using apathetic and emotionless language to show horrible child butchering can be presented as simply something that must happen in normal society through the marketplace. In "Babycakes," Gaiman further criticizes societal apathy in that societal members justify their own involvement in systems of exploitation whenever there seems to be some benefit in their own favor. Gaiman depicts a world that, rather than resisting the exploitation of babies, justifies it as a requirement for maintaining their normal lifestyle, claiming that while the act "was hard, of course, [it was] necessary" and that "no one could deny that" (Gaiman 1). The alarming ease with which this rationalization is accomplished shows how easily society can accept violence as necessary and how readily individuals will be accepting of immorality given that it can be justified by a particular situation or requirement. Gaiman further illuminates this idea of societal tolerance for immorality by admitting that "some people complained, of course. But then, they always do," before saying that "everything went back to normal" (Gaiman). With this comment, Gaiman shows just how well this normalization is accomplished. It is evident by reading Swift and Gaiman that this systemic oppression that

pervades every point in history for humanity is a necessary additive aspect that results from a desensitization effect brought on by the acceptance that things become normal. It is suggested that by this acceptance, even the darkest morality can become systematized.

In conclusion, "A Modest Proposal" and "Babycakes" serve as powerful indictments of the injustices of domination and the perils of logic without humanity. Through the use of irony, reduction, and calculated tonal shifts, Swift and Gaiman remind their audience that the exploitation of the powerless is almost inevitable when a society allows dehumanization and prioritizes rational arguments over ethical responsibility. These works demonstrate that when logic is applied to moral questions without consideration for human dignity, the resulting harm is profound, shown by economic systems that transform people into commodities, intellectual hierarchies that justify systematic cruelty, and societal normalization that ensures ordinary citizens participate in oppression without question. Both authors encourage a deep reflection on our own complicity in systems of exploitation, arguing that change becomes imperative whenever domination and emotionless logic cause sentient suffering. By making the reader uncomfortable enough to reflect on these systemic failures, Swift and Gaiman successfully advocate for a world where reason is always tempered by the essential weight of human compassion.

Works Cited

Gaiman, Neil. "Babycakes." *Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions*, HarperCollins, 1998.

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