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Cannibalism as Social Critique

Through greed and exploitation, the wealthy have, for thousands of years, risen above the rest of civilization. Under the ideals of capitalism, social classes and wealth gaps are naturally formed and mold society into that of what the rich and elite desire. Early eighteenth century Ireland was devastated by the inequality between the many impoverished Irish Catholics and few wealthy English landowners. The elite class and wealthy Englishmen repeatedly ignored the various serious proposals put forth by other Irishmen that would require them to change their negative and egocentric behavior. Jonathan Swift, in an attempt to bridge the gap and remove beggars from Irish streets, created the satirical piece, “A Modest Proposal”, aberrantly presenting the consumption of Irish children as a solution to the food and resource shortage and effectively satirizing the selfishness of the wealthy. Through the use of various rhetorical and satirical devices in the proposal, Swift both exposes and discourages the inequality between the small elite class and the remainder of the population.

Before the line of consent and during the introduction to his proposal Swift endeavors to keep readers invested in his piece via his serious tone, ironic modesty, and lengthy start. The proposal’s slow and emotionless build-up, characterized by his detached and matter-of-fact descriptions of children, poverty, and human suffering demonstrate his reserved and professional approach throughout the introduction. Swift presents the passage as an important and relevant solution to the horrible poverty plaguing Ireland. He frequently hints at his revolting purpose,

indirectly introducing his readers to the dark nature of the situation and facilitating their later exposure to his unconventional and repulsive idea. An example is his assertion that babies “instead of being a charge upon their parents, or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall, on the contrary, contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing of many thousands” (Swift 2). This way, when readers subsequently encounter his cannibalistic beliefs, they are less likely to dismiss the suggestion outright and instead remain receptive to his arguments and perspectives. In addition to this, Swift, by omitting and disregarding the cruelty, savagery, and inhumanity of his proposal, presents it as an effective and astounding fix, suggesting that “[children] shall, on the contrary, contribute to the feeding, and partly clothing of many thousands” (Swift 2). The vagueness utilized by the author compellingly encourages readers to reflect on his proposed solution and independently recognize the cannibalistic approach. This, combined with the various techniques he uses, effectively sustains readers' attentiveness and belief in Swift's piece.

Swift's depictions of both the ruling and lower classes facilitate readers in their understanding of the problem at hand and publicize the grave inequality. In these depictions, particularly that of the ruling class, Swifts utilizes irony by calling them “gentleman”, “a very worthy person”, or “a true lover of his country” while simultaneously portraying them as insane people who indulge in cannibalism and eat the citizens of their very own country, making them traitors (Swift 6). In doing this, the author forces readers to reflect on the character of the Irish elite and whether or not they are in truth governing the country to the best of their ability, putting fault on them for the situation at hand and swaying readers' opinions by convincing them of the wrongdoing and selfishness exhibited by the wealthy. Furthermore, the reduction of the impoverished citizens to that of swine, cattle, and various other animals breeds sympathy from the reader for the cruel and inhumane nature of Ireland's social structure and makes them not

only desire but actively seek change in Irish society. Reductio ad absurdum is used as Swift takes the dire social issues of poverty and overpopulation in Ireland and carries them to absurd extremes in order to critique British policies: “A young healthy child, well nursed, is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout” (Swift 4). This outrageous suggestion further highlights the cruelty and imbalance of wealth in Irish society, again pointing the finger of the reader straight at the wealthy elite.

Through appealing to the audience's pathos, ethos, and logos, Swift effectively persuades readers to his point of view. The author builds up a sense of credibility as their satirical persona of a man with authority, insight, and standing is formed through the emotionless, serious tone, high diction, and logical argument. The author's tone is entirely focused on the poverty at hand, forcing readers to listen to his argument and invest themselves in the piece. In addition to this, Swift employs words such as “prodigious”, “deplorable”, “professed”, “rudiment”, and “prolific” to develop his character of a highly educated individual, further establishing his knowledgeable and worthiness (Swift 1,2,3,5). As to not convey the impression of Swift being a madman upon his readers, he utilizes various testimonies from “very knowledgeable” American friends, French physicians, Salmanaazor himself (a fraud), and an ironic “true lover of his country” who murders his fellow Irishmen (Swift 4, 6). This makes it seem as though Swift's justification is properly based and involves various other peripheral parties in agreement with his ideals. With this, not only does he add authority to his argument, but he also incorporates logic. The author, in providing reason and rationale for his proposal, integrates many statistics and calculations to demonstrate his comprehensive understanding of the situation at hand, again forcing the reader to complete his essay and attentively consider his insights. For example, Swift, when deliberating the number of children of poor parents annually born claims “there may be

about two hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders; from which number I subtract thirty thousand couple, who are able to maintain their own children...there will remain an hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the year.” (Swift 3). In conjunction with this Swift utilizes pathos to invoke emotion upon the reader and sympathize with the impoverished Irish. He frequently uses outlandish and abhorrent imagery and obscenity to make readers recognize the severity of the situation and cruelty of the upper class upon the rest of the country. He repeatedly reduces the impoverished to livestock, such as cattle and swine, labeling them as mere farm animals used only for their reproductive ability and flesh: “[Pigs] which are no way comparable in taste or magnificence to a well grown, fat yearly child, which roasted whole will make a considerable figure at a Lord Mayor's feast” (Swift 10). Using reduction and obscenity, Swift establishes an emotional connection between the reader and the impoverished, evoking sympathy and making the audience more receptive to his message and solutions, motivating people to take action or change their previous perception of the problem. Additionally, Swift, through the art of persuasion, draws in readers of his grotesque piece, forcing their continuous absorption and transforming initial repulsion into an intellectual commitment to engage with the proposal and seek a solution to the problem.

Swift concludes his proposal by unveiling a plethora of alternative solutions to the widespread poverty in Ireland and in doing so, presents them in such a manner so that reader feels as though they have made these conclusions. Through the use of parallel structure, the author introduces policies like “taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound...using neither clothes, nor household furniture except what is of our own growth and manufacture...utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury” (Swift 11). The readers, by this point in time, will have been hungry for a solution that does not involve cannibalism and

now that Swift has effectively gained their attention and involvement in the problem, he can finally introduce the solutions of the many others before him who unsuccessfully tried to break through the strong socioeconomic barrier between the masses and the elite. In the text itself, Swift seemingly does not agree with the ideas, making it seem as though the readers are coming to these inferences on their merit, compellingly drawing attention to the policies that he believes will help repair the inequality and widespread poverty in Ireland. Furthermore, by disclosing these various potentially constructive policies, Swift relies on readers to infer that they are not already in place in Irish society and that the wealthy Irish and English elite are forcing poor and intolerable conditions upon the public for their own selfish benefit, advancing the satirical characterization of the wealthy and exposing their profound disconnection from the suffering of the impoverished population.

In "A Modest Proposal", Jonathan Swift employs satirical techniques such as irony, ethos, pathos, logos, testimony, and more to expose the callous indifference of the wealthy elite towards the great impoverished population of Ireland. The use of a grotesque proposal of infant cannibalism invokes emotion from the audience and forces readers to confront the stark social and economic inequalities of 18th-century Irish society.

Works Cited

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