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Humanities

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A Study on Humanity's Greed

What would happen in a world where capitalism is taken too far? The events in “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift and “Friday Black” by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah give us insights into an Earth where greed and money rule. “A Modest Proposal” was written by Jonathan Swift in 1729. Ireland during this time was far poorer than England, and the English upper class wanted to keep it this way. They severely limited the power of the Irish government, and suppressed the majority Catholic population. Famine became widespread, and soon the people began begging and dying in droves. Swift, despite often criticizing Ireland, fought for its political and economic independence from England. He wrote many pieces criticizing the English nobility and vouching for Irish independence, such as “A Modest Proposal”, which highlighted the cruelty and greed of Ireland’s English overlords. Around 300 years later, “Friday Black” was written by Adjei-Brenyah, criticizing the consumerist culture in America by targeting Black Friday. Black Friday has been a very popular American tradition taking place the day after Thanksgiving. Massive discounts, large shopping crowds, and extended hours are all hallmarks of a traditional Black Friday experience. Adjei-Brenyah critiques Black Friday by turning hyper-consumerism into a rabies-like illness, highlighting the effects of America’s consumerism culture and the ones who control it. While “A Modest Proposal” uses more controlled and rational prose to target the greed and cruelty of the elite, “Friday Black” uses a more fragmentary sentence structure to highlight how desensitized the workers are to consumeristic “rage”, and

together, their use of a narratorial persona who accepts the horrors of their worlds demonstrates how unchecked greed leads to bloodshed.

“A Modest Proposal” uses calm and logical diction to target the greed of the English elite, while “Friday Black” uses more aggressive language to target consumerism culture in the US. When Swift is laying out his proposal for the English lords, he calculates that of the 120 thousand children in Ireland, 20 thousand should be used for reproductive purposes, and, “the remaining hundred thousand may, at a year old, be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune, through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good table” (Swift 67-70). Swift avoids emotional and opinionated language when giving his proposal. He only uses cold logic to back up his ideas. Swift’s lack of emotion throughout his pitch mirrors the emotions of the English elite, who viewed the Irish as nothing more than statistics and burdens. In contrast to the rational prose of “A Modest Proposal”, “Friday Black” uses aggressive and exaggerated language throughout the passage. Soon after the mall is opened up for Black Friday, the narrator deals with all sorts of crazed customers. A man with wild eyes screams, “‘Blue! Son! SleekPack!’...as he grabs my ankle. I use my right foot to stop his hand, and I feel his fingers crush beneath my boots. He howls, ‘SleekPack. Son!’ while licking his injured hand” (Adjei-Brenyah 106). The shopper has turned into a wild beast. Words like “howl” and “foam” portray the consumer as a rabid animal rather than a normal human being. The shopper perfectly represents how consumerism prioritizes money and desire over life in America. Excessive greed combined with artificial pricing causes consumers to jump at lower prices, and while Adjei-Brenyah’s portrayal of Black Friday is heavily exaggerated, it still captures the competitiveness encouraged by consumer culture. Beyond word choice, both authors further develop their critiques of greed

through sentence structure, using form to highlight how violence is internalized in their respective societies.

“Friday Black” uses a fragmentary sentence structure to highlight the desensitization of the workers in such a capitalistic society, while “A Modest Proposal” uses longer and more complex sentence structure to construct an enlightened facade for its barbaric premise. In “Friday Black”, the narrator’s numb response to chaos is captured in a few, simple clauses: “Lance walks up to the small pink body. He’s pulling a pallet jack and holding a huge push broom. He thrusts the broom head into her side and tries to sweep her onto the pallet jack so he can roll her to the section we’ve designated for bodies” (Adjei-Brenyah 106). The sentence structure is short, simple, and repetitive, mirroring the narrator’s desensitized psyche. Each short sentence represents a step in a grimly efficient procedure: observe, approach, act, and dispose. The short, neat description of where the dead are disposed represents how violence is an internalized issue in this consumerist dystopia, and forces readers to experience the normalcy of atrocity.

Conversely, Swift constructs his arguments in a complex fashion to disguise the barbarity of his proposal. When he starts his proposal off, he mentions he has, “been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, 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; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust” (Swift 58-61). Mentioning his American acquaintance builds some rapport, even if they are looked down upon at the time. The lengthy catalog of cooking methods builds the image of an educated and tasteful man, and the phrase “I make no doubt” mimics scholarly certainty. The entire sentence, with its complex diction and reputation building, constructs a facade of enlightenment and rationality that covers the savage concepts of cannibalism and infanticide. While these two pieces have their

differences, such as how they use diction and structure, they also share many similarities, such as their use of a narrator who accepts the brutality that surrounds them.

Both “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black” make use of a narratorial persona who readily accepts the horrors of their world, demonstrating how excessive greed leads to violence. Swift’s narrator demonstrates this perverse acceptance by presenting a calculation of monetary gain, stating, “the maintenance of an hundred thousand children...cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece per annum, the nation’s stock will be thereby increased to the tables of all gentleman of fortune in the kingdom...And the money will circulate among our selves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture” (Swift 152-157). Swift turns an act of extreme violence against children into a sensible economic policy, exposing how greed can desensitize people to even the worst atrocities. By reducing children to “the nation’s stock”, the narrator relates human lives to commodities whose value lies only in their ability to generate profit. The calculation of costs and benefits mirrors a standard discussion on economics, stripping the violence of any emotional weight it once held. In this way, Swift satirizes a society in which greed allows brutality to be justified, normalized, and celebrated. This same moral numbness appears in “Friday Black”, where the narrator, who is observing the chaos around him, states, “There are survivors, champions of the first wave, pulling bags stretched to their capacity. Using the last of their energy to haul their newly purchased happiness home. And there are the dead, everywhere. I get two dollar-menu burgers, a small fry, and a drink from BurgerLand” (Adjei-Brenyah 111). Like “A Modest Proposal”, the narrator normalizes mass death as a result of consumer satisfaction. By referring to shoppers as “survivors” and “champions of the first wave”, the narrator paints a picture of warfare, suggesting that shopping has turned into a violent competition where only the strongest survive. The blunt statement “there are the dead,

everywhere” is followed by the narrator ordering fast food, a juxtaposition that reveals his complete indifference to the carnage that surrounds him.

Both Swift and Adjei-Brenyah demonstrate how greed can corrupt society, but the way they go about it is very different. While both use a desensitized narrator who readily accepts the violence around them, Swift uses more rational prose to target the brutality of the English nobility while Adjei-Brenyah uses a more fragmented sentence structure to show how desensitized people have come to the violence that surrounds them. Though “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black” are separated by three centuries, both authors warn that when profits outweigh human life, society begins to accept what was once unacceptable. Together, these works suggest that a world ruled purely by money is not defined by progress and success, but by a chilling truth: when greed goes unchecked, humanity is the first thing lost.

Works Cited

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