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Cutthroat Commentary on Capitalism in “A Modest Proposal”

Capitalism was introduced by economist Adam Smith during the 18th century, with the idea that the codependence of the market, the business, and the worker would create a balance that would protect each of the sections. The idea gained ground among the wealthy in many parts of Europe, but especially in the UK. These people already had money to invest in new ventures and were able to create increasingly larger profits for themselves. This was especially true in Ireland at the time, where the wealthy profited off of hoarded Irish land and businesses created in England. This resulted in a large poor population which was at the mercy of the money-making elite. Jonathan Swift wrote “A Modest Proposal” after seeing the impact of such divisions when posted for work in Ireland. He reveals the upper class’s negative effect on society by using an absurd piece on eating babies for the benefit of Ireland, using the fact that only the wealthy were literate to target this class of society. In “A Modest Proposal,” Swift delivers a haunting argument against capitalism by characterizing society as greedy through a business proposal style piece delivered by a callous persona.

Through the use of imagery and tone, Swift appeals to the wealthy, elite audience to develop a persona as someone part of upper class as well. Swift garners the sympathy of the audience by beginning the piece with a description of the “melancholy object [to] those, who...travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads and cabin doors crowded with beggars...importuning every passenger for an alms” (Swift 1). He directly references the audience with the description of “those, who travel in the country” to establish the relevance of

this piece to the reader, which helps draw the reader's attention into the piece. He then goes onto a description of "the streets, the roads and cabin doors crowded with beggars," using imagery to paint a vivid picture of the inescapable poverty. In addition, Swift develops a victimized tone with the use of words such as "melancholy" and "importuning" to suggest that the inescapable poverty is simply a nuisance, masking the fact that the habits of the wealthy are what created this situation. By developing this sentiment that poverty causes problems for the wealthy, Swift creates a persona that sympathizes with the common ideas of the wealthy. He develops this persona to build a representation of the wealthy on which he can elaborate in order to tease out problems of the satirical target, the wealthy upper class. Combined with the initial direct reference, this persona also helps the audience become more receptive to the ideas that Swift will introduce, because it appears that he will share ideas to reaffirm their beliefs. Swift's use of imagery and tone help build a persona to suggest that the piece will argue from the view of the wealthy, helping set the satirical target as well as making the audience more receptive to his ideas to come.

Through the use of hyperbole, Swift emulates the business tactic of creating a problem in order to argue for the need of his baby eating enterprise. By doing so, Swift reveals the extreme greed of the wealthy spurred by the influence of capitalism. Swift explains that "a boy or a girl before twelve years old, is no saleable commodity, and...will not yield above three pounds," while "the charge of nutriments and rags [is] at least four times that value" (Swift 4). He starts by describing the children as "no saleable commodity," suggesting that children can be measured in value by a monetary amount. He proceeds with a meticulous calculation that contains a great emphasis on the "investment" and "revenue" from children to introduce the issue that children are unprofitable. The persona's willingness to place unwavering attention toward the numbers

and fully ignore other qualities of the children helps characterize the representation of the wealthy to be callous and frighteningly inhumane. In addition, the style of using revenues and profits to assess the value of situations is reminiscent of a business proposal, which builds the idea that the persona is influenced by capitalist principles. In connecting to the business style, it can be noted that it is common for businesses to create problems to advertise, as a way to convince the public that their product is worth buying. Swift employs this tactic by using a persona to create this issue that children are unprofitable in order to suggest that a treatment of children as products rather than humans is necessary. By having this callous persona use such manipulative tactics, Swift reveals that the greediness of the wealthy is a result of the absurdity of logic that stems from the prevalent capitalistic style of thinking. Through hyperbole and a business proposal style, Swift attributes the selfishness of the wealthy to capitalism in order to reveal the flaws of the economic system.

Swift advertises his idea through the use of different satirical devices in conjunction with a persona in order to reveal how the greed of the wealthy is the direct result of the vices of capitalism. In support of his idea to raise babies like cattle, Swift explains “that a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and in a solar year, if tolerably nursed, increases to 28 pounds” (Swift 5). The hyperbole at play is one common in advertisements of businesses, where augmented versions of products are showcased in order to increase the audience’s appeal toward the product. Swift claims that a newborn will weigh 12 lbs., when in reality an average newborn weighs 7.5 lbs. when born (Physical Growth in Newborns), and further augments the numbers to claim that a one-year-old will weigh 28 lbs., almost 10 lbs. heavier than they actually grow (Murray). In the context of meat, which is often sold by the pound, these differences generate drastically different returns. The disparity indicates that intentional trickery is at play in order to

gain a large number of employees and hold power over them by creating a situation where they earn far less than expected. As a result, Swift uses hyperbole to show the persona's cruelty in how it is willing to intentionally fool the poor into false hopes for the sake of power and profit. Since the persona is a direct representation of the upper class, the hyperbole reveals how the emphasis on profit due to capitalism is a problematic idea that causes such cruelty within the upper class. He creates another form of advertisement by describing how "the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of Popish infants, is at least three to one in this kingdom, and therefore it will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the number of Papists among us" (Swift 5). Through the use of imagery, Swift paints a powerful image of plentiful markets due to the baby sale, which is striking in a time when there was little food for many people. The use of the positive image helps sell the baby eating business with another hyper-real image of the greatness that will occur due to the baby sale. Swift ironically introduces another "advantage" by suggesting that the baby sale will also rid Ireland of papists, who comprise a large part of the poor population. Swift's principal argument is that this idea will benefit the wealthy, who will no longer have to see this "melancholy object" of poverty, as well as the poor, who will have a business through which they can support themselves. Through suggesting this other advantage, he turns the idea of benefits on its head to reason that it is advantageous to eliminate a majority of the poor population, which has the opposite effect for the poor than what was originally argued for. Through the use of irony, it is revealed that the persona changes their attitude toward the poor at whim, showing how the wealthy simply manipulate the poor like tools for the benefit of the upper class. Combining such sentiments with the image of markets filled with poor babies, this advertisement subtly pushes for the idea that the poor should be considered a commodity simply because they lack money. These ideas show how the

capitalist method of measuring worth solely based on monetary value leads to such cruelty and greediness within the upper class, revealing the flawed nature of capitalism itself. Through an advertising style of writing, Swift characterizes the wealthy as greedy and callous to reveal that capitalism is inherently flawed and causes problems of greediness.

Swift uses irony to present and counter other solutions to the issue of unprofitable children in order to reveal the absurdity of the capitalist focus on profit. Swift explains that his plan will “prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas! Too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes” (Swift 2-3). He suggests that abortions and infanticide are present solutions to the dilemma; however, he ironically refutes them by claiming that such solutions are the “sacrificing of poor innocent babes.” The empathetic diction helps build an emotional connection between the image of the baby and the reader to emphasize the immorality of abortions and infanticide. Such diction is a stark contrast to the inhumane way the persona considers children throughout the proposal, with descriptions such as “saleable commodity.” The irony is that in both abortions and infanticides as well as in the baby eating business, the children are slaughtered; however, the persona claims that such killing is only moral when it is done for a profit as in the baby eating business. The problematic nature of the capitalistic measurement of worth by monetary value is shown, because it allows the representation of the wealthy to justify immoral actions and rebut more correct ones simply based on the presence of a profit. By use of irony, Swift reveals the intrinsic issues underlying capitalism that allow for immorality and greediness within society.

Swift uses persona along with other satirical devices to develop a business proposal that uses the greediness of the wealthy in order to reveal the absurdity of capitalism. He begins by using imagery and tone to develop a representation of the wealthy which he could manipulate.

Swift continues on to an argument emulating a business proposal, where the employment of irony and hyperbole through the different stages of the proposal help attribute the problems with the wealthy to the inherent flaws of capitalism itself. Pure capitalism at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution created horrific work environments for the poor factory workers who lived on day-to-day wages. Though written some years before the that time, the piece shines wisdom on the issues of exploitation and unsustainability surrounding capitalism because of how focus on profit helps businesses justify immoral actions. Even in the modern day, we struggle with these issues despite regulations to protect workers. Such a piece allows us to step back from society and reconsider the systems that appear as commonplace, to allow one to reflect on how our views on profits and morality as a society can be improved to avoid the pitfalls of capitalism. By doing so, the economic system can be altered to adopt this new mindset to allow for appropriate treatment of all groups.

Works Cited

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