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The Normalization of Cruelty

In recent years, several authors have employed satire to raise awareness of serious societal issues that have been ignored. For instance, Neil Gaiman, in his short story “Babycakes,” draws attention to a future where all animals have disappeared. Throughout the story, Gaiman never fully explains how or why the animals have suddenly gone missing. However, it is strongly implied that humans are responsible for their disappearance due to overuse, abuse, and exploitation. Since there are no longer any animals to eat or experiment with, humans decide to turn to the one other thing they consider “worthy” to be a replacement: babies. This idea alludes heavily to “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift, in which the author employs exaggeration and logic to expose moral hypocrisy, compelling the reader’s attention to the cruelty and indifference behind society’s treatment of people in poverty. Through Gaiman’s use of satire, the author criticises how society faces and views the cruelty and suffering of animals. Throughout “Babycakes,” Neil Gaiman employs a heavy use of irony, grotesque imagery, and a disturbingly calm voice to expose society’s calmness and acceptance towards animal suffering and abuse. He characterizes society as desensitized and hypocritical by replacing animals with babies, forcing readers to acknowledge and reflect upon the cruelty that humans have normalized.

One of the main ways Gaiman makes his point is through the use of situational irony, specifically the idea that humans think they are so bright and intelligent and just better than everything else, yet still make such unethical and harmful decisions. In the short story, the

narrator notes that once the animals disappeared, society decided there was “[n]o reason to change our [lives],” including their diets or the testing of products (Gaiman 10). The irony, along with reversal, is evident here because, rather than being alarmed by the disappearance of all the animals, people treat it as a minor inconvenience and move on as quickly as possible, demonstrating their apathy. Instead of maybe questioning the actions of society and trying to figure out why this may have happened, the people continue the same practices and justify their actions by turning to babies as their next victims. The narrator writes, “Babies can't talk. They can hardly move. A baby is not a rational, thinking creature,” which is similar to reasoning that is commonly used to attempt to justify animal testing and cruelty (Gaiman 13). The irony lies in the idea that humans claim superiority based on their intelligence. However, that same intelligence is what leads them to make unethical choices. The irony lies within the notion that humans say they are better and are superior because of how smart they are. However, whatever intelligence they may have is leading them to make the same choices they originally made, which led to the animals' disappearance. By making this idea seem reasonable and logical, Gaiman emphasizes how hypocritical and self-serving society's morals truly are, forcing readers to recognize how easily people can justify and rationalize something as hurtful as abuse and exploitation simply because it benefits them.

Gaiman also relies heavily on grotesque diction and imagery in the story, attempting to reveal to the reader how cruelty has unfortunately become a standard practice within society, and this acceptance of cruelty contrasts with their claim to intelligence. The author writes in a way to specifically describe the actions of humans on babies as graphic and disturbing, hoping to make them feel a certain way and pick up on the point regarding human ignorance. The narrator states, “Some of them we ate. Baby flesh is tender and succulent,” just casually mentioning a horrifying

thought that no one would ever imagine doing to a baby (Gaiman 15). Gaiman continues with the disturbing imagery and exaggerations, describing how they treat the babies, like burning, freezing, or using them for testing “until they stopped breathing or their blood ceased to flow” (Gaiman 21-22). These types of descriptions are explicitly written in a way to make the reader uncomfortable, since it is such a foreign idea of basically torturing babies, the universal symbol of innocence. However, the general actions are not far off from what people are so comfortable doing to animals in everyday life. By exaggerating the descriptions of this harm being inflicted upon the babies, Gaiman creates a more personal situation that forces the reader to stop ignoring and brushing over the topics of animal cruelty and actually think about how it affects society. The grotesque and gory imagery forces the reader to picture and confront the type of violent actions that they have become so used to overlooking, along with pointing out how desensitized society has become to exploitation and pain inflicted on others, “lesser” than humans.

Another primary satirical technique Gaiman employs is his use of a calm, neutral tone throughout the story, as it makes the drastic actions appear ordinary and shows how easily moral issues can be disregarded. The narrator matter-of-factly describes horrific and painful actions, as if everything he says is expected, creating a sense of contrast. Throughout the story, the author describes extreme violence towards animals and babies in severe detail. However, at the end, the narrator simply states, “It was hard, of course, but necessary. No one could deny that” (Gaiman 23). This is a form of understatement and juxtaposition, making the cruel actions being performed even more disturbing because it shows how society has become too normalized and can rationalize abuse and torture. There is no show of any sort of primary emotions by the narrator, such as sadness, guilt, or rage, which is similar to how people in society currently treat and talk about animal testing, consumption, and exploitation. The same calm, neutral tone

continues to the end of the short story, when “everything went back to normal,” but then the babies disappear as well (Gaiman 27). Once again, rather than reflecting on what happened and trying to figure out why, the people simply state that they will eventually find a solution because “Humans are smart” (Gaiman 32). This response, with its detached, unapologetic tone, highlights how society has become so normalized to these actions and how they prioritize convenience for itself over kindness towards others.

Through irony, heavy imagery, exaggeration, and a disturbing yet calm narrative voice, Gaiman exposes a society that values intelligence and superiority over others, yet still makes unjust and immoral decisions. Overall, “Babycakes” is a harsh example of satire, intending to disturb and touch the reader, prompting them to reflect on their own and societal actions regarding the treatment of all animals around them.

Works Cited

Gaiman, Neil. "Babycakes." *Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions*, William Morrow, 1998, pp. 337–38.