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Brit Lit Final

Prompt #1

The time and place of a literary work’s conception has a profound effect on its content. Throughout history writers have addressed the troubles and prosperities of their time, each with their own unique stance and style. The epic poem *Beowulf* is an example of a work supporting the moral and social norms of its time. On the contrary, Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* provides a sarcastic, turbulent stance on 18th century issues. Not all literature fits so clearly under these categories, however. In fact, some writers intentionally make their pieces impartial and mysterious in effort to increase their appeal. A great example of this is William Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. Throughout the play, critical scenes can always be interpreted two ways, leaving the viewer questioning the overall message. Social expectations give writers points of inspiration, but do not effect their position.

*Beowulf*, the epic poem, derives substance and morals from the religion and culture of its time. Generosity, loyalty, and the desire to attain fame and glory were all traits of a great king. *Beowulf* supported this social trend by creating an ideal warrior and leader. Beowulf enters the epic with a long and impressive boast. He then backs up his bragging by risking his life several times for his people. “Let whoever can win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, that will be his best and only bulwark.” This goes along with the Pagan belief of comitatius. A thane warrior was expected to swear their life and loyalty to the king. Beowulf’s fearlessness of death describes this ideal warrior. *Beowulf* supports the values of its time period, by embodying the heroic code, and various Christian and Pagan beliefs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum lies *A Modest Proposal.* In the 18th century, Ireland was experiencing a combination of two problems: over population, and a food shortage. In effort to rectify this issue, Jonathan Swift devised a “modest” proposal. As the essay opens, it appears that he is agreeing with the English politicians. When the reader makes a double take when he hits a line in the middle of the passage, “I have been assured […] that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food.” Swift’s proposal may initially come as a shock to its readers. How can this man be serious? One simply cannot feast on babies. It becomes humorous, however, when he explains the logic behind his plan. It all adds up to make sense. The only thing missing was morality. Swift uses witty satire to backhandedly get the attention of those in power.

Unlike the previous two examples, *Taming of the Shrew* maintains pristine parity throughout the play. The play opens with the conflict of Petruchio trying to tame crazy Kate. They argue about trivial matters such as whether the object in the sky is the sun or the moon. “How bright and goodly shines the moon […] henceforth, so it shall be”. On the surface, the play appears to show Petruchio as the victor. Going with this perspective, it argues that a man should impart full power over his woman. In return, this woman should submit to him so they can both be happy. Another view can be taken on this argument, however. By consciously submitting to Petruchio’s petty demands, Kate would be given more freedom and privileges. Kate was the one who actually tamed Petruchio. Neither perspective is necessarily right. The beauty of this unbiased play is that the meaning is left up to the interpretation of the viewer or director.

Writers gain inspiration from the events, issues, and social sentiments of their time period. In the process of transforming these ideas into a piece of literature, they add their own insight and perspective. Their writing may reflect their societal norms, or do exactly the opposite. Expectations from society have profound influence on writers, they do not, however, effect the position these writers take.