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The Satirical Attack on Societies Within “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black”

When did savagery become the norm for civilization? In “A Modest Proposal” by Dr. Jonathan Swift, the audience sees the world through the lens of an upperclass man living in an impoverished Ireland in 1729. During this time, Ireland was a British colony, and though they were British people, they were not treated the same due to differing religions, the Irish being Catholic and the British being Protestant. This discrepancy in religion often led the British to discriminate against the Irish, and with a majority of Ireland being owned by wealthy British landowners, the Irish were forced into poverty with no way to escape. Being disgusted by the poor Irish beggars littering the streets, the narrator proposes his plan to the British government to fix this issue by holding the beggars in captivity and breeding them as livestock for the wealthy to indulge in feasts on their children. In “Friday Black” by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, the audience is presented with a modern world in which the commercialized holiday Black Friday has been reduced to a game of survival of the fittest for those who wish to take advantage of the deals. The narrator and his co-workers at a department store fend off against the hordes of rabid customers, protecting themselves while doing their job as employees. The story makes it a normal event for customers to brawl over various items, bloodying up one another or worse, even biting employees that aren’t careful.

In the short stories “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black” by Dr. Jonathan Swift and Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah respectively, the authors introduce many similar thematic elements to condemn the natural human tendency to create societies based on social stratification. The authors do this through dehumanizing and desensitizing people, along with contrasting the experiences of different social classes.

Throughout “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black,” the authors dehumanize a lower class of people, showing how societies build superiority complexes that normalize brutality. In “A Modest Proposal,” the satirical persona’s perception of the poor quickly brings us to speed on his viewpoint. Throughout the story, he constantly belittles and degrades the status of the poor beggars that infest the streets of Ireland. In his plan to capture and contain the poor in order to clean the streets, he suggests that the children “may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males” (Swift, 4). This horrifying treatment of human beings reduces them to the level of animals in captivity, demeaning their lives and rights. He goes on to compare babies directly to livestock, referring to a newborn child as a “child just dropped from its dam,” (Swift, 2) terminology only heard in animal sciences. Through this use of disgusting diction, the narrator shows his perspective on the poor, believing them to be worth nothing more than livestock, creatures that we breed in captivity and live solely to be slaughtered. He continues his sermon, preaching how “infant's flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March, and a little before and after.” (Swift, 5) This perspective of babies coming in and out of season commodifies them, comparing them to normal products that can be bought and sold on a whim. This view on those doing worse than oneself reveals the superiority complexes that emerge in structured, stratified societies that end up endorsing violence. Similarly, in “Friday Black,” reduces the crowd of shoppers into one far from what is considered to be “human.” In the

beginning of the story, the to-be customers impatiently wait at the front gate, “shak[ing] and pull[ing], their grubby fingers like worms through the grating.” (Adjei-Brenyah, 104) This grotesque view of people waiting behind a gate, with the vivid diction of them shaking the gate, trying to get in, unknowing to the store’s schedule, presents them as wild animals, eyes only on the deals, the “meat.” The store then turns into all hell when the gate opens, people “rush[ing],... clawing[,] and stampeding” (Adjei-Brenyah, 106). The narrator builds on their negative view of the shoppers by using even more savage diction, exaggerating their actions to present them as brutes. The author further goes on to alienate the shoppers from what is perceived as human through their caveman-like talk: ““C-C-COAL BUBBLE. SMALL, ME! COAL!”” one man says to the narrator while “beating his chest” (Adjei-Brenyah, 107). This lack of normalcy makes it feel that the shoppers are no longer humans, justifying any use of force that may come as a need to “protect” oneself from a “monster.” Though heavily exaggerated, the reader can see how typical events do unfold similarly to the ones presented in the text. Sadly, in human societies, groups of people are seen as beasts and discriminated against, violated, and more. Even in the more comical scenario of Black Friday shopping, people often do get out of hand in chasing deals, becoming desperate, often looked down upon by others, especially those of a higher class. The authors of these texts present a class of people as less than, often bringing them to the level of animals, where humans no longer feel guilt from hurting something non-human.

Within “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black,” the authors desensitize the progenitors of violence, showing how the atrocious conditions many deal with in typical societies become the norm. While walking the gloomy streets that are “crowded with beggars of the female sex” (Swift, 1) who are often accompanied by children, the narrator does not feel sympathy. Rather than helping or wishing well for the poor people on the streets and the

children who will grow up to be the next generation, the narrator instead sees them as nothing but annoyances who “importun[e] every passenger for an alms.” (Swift, 1) The satirical persona reduces the significance of the terrible situation that the poor face, showing their detached state from the normalized reality of the country. Despite the terrible situation faced by those around him, he is unsympathetic, even annoyed by those who are of a lower class than himself. He further presents himself as such, believing in his horrific plan to cannibalise children that “this food will be somewhat dear.” (Swift, 5) This is ironic, as the narrator completely underexaggerates the impact of taking and eating the children of others, evoking a sense of disgust in the audience. In doing so, the satirical persona shows the pain of others to be commonplace and thus unfounded to be concerned with. In “Friday Black,” the main character along with his co-workers have become completely desensitized to the violence occurring between them and the customers. In the short story, in the mayhem of shoppers rushing into the store, a little girl is trampled by the crowd, and rather than anyone recognizing the horrifying thing they’ve done, they go on about their business. Lance, a worker at the department store, doesn’t offer the girl help either, instead he just “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) This cold diction discomforts the reader as they observe the disdainful lack of empathy exhibited by the workers and other customers. This lack of empathy shows how the characters within the story have become used to such events, becoming indifferent to them. Along with this, the fact that there is a section designated for bodies shows the normalcy of this event. When atrocities are normalized, they are ignored and overlooked, allowing people to stop caring for one another. Unfortunately, this sort of situation is more than evident within the real world. While the wealthy stay at the top of the social ladder forever, the poor are forced to endure horrible conditions to have a chance to rise. In the meantime they beg for their livelihood, however

are often met with rejection after rejection, showing the normalization of misery and the development of indifference for them in stratified societies. So, “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black” show how the normalization of distress develops within stratified societies, building into an indifference for them at the level of the entire society.

Finally, in “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black,” the authors argue against the stratified societies, showing how they lead to nothing but competition that impedes the ability to help one another. In “A Modest Proposal,” the lifestyle differences between the poverty-stricken lower class and the luxurious upper class severely contrast. While the lower class has no choice but to beg on the streets, possibly being able to get “two shillings” (Swift, 2) to barely provide for even one child, the upper class has no worries of the like. The satirical persona only concerns himself with providing for the unnecessary wants of the higher class. He treats the corpses of the babies as a luxury, saying that their bodies “will make four dishes of excellent nutritive meat, when he hath only some particular friend.” The narrator presents the lives of others as something to indulge in, which, disgusting as it is, shows his privileged and unconcerned view of life. He further plans about how “the skin of [the babies]… will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen.” (Swift, 6) Having his concerns about how to dress well while others must worry about how they will provide for their family from day to day shows the discrepancy in these walks of life. These concerns over superfluous topics prevent the satirical persona from actually wishing to help the poorer class, showing how greed impedes compassion within people. The customers in “Friday Black” too are constantly engrossed in competition. Trying to take advantage of the holiday to save some money, the Black Friday shoppers have no choice but to constantly fight with one another over anything. One such customer, chasing a fleece “takes off her heel and smashes a child in the jaw with it before he can grab [it].”

(Adjei-Brenyah, 107) The desperation of the customers for various commercial items only brews competition between them. This competition goes on to lead many to extremes, such as violence, harming others in order to secure their desires. Rather than helping one another, these societal concepts, such as money, pit people against one another, fighting instead of working for a common goal that helps everyone. “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black” both show how concepts formed in stratified societies brew competition that inhibits peoples’ abilities to work together.

The short stories “A Modest Proposal” and “Friday Black” use strategies like dehumanization, desensitization, and a contrast between the experiences of different social classes in order to condemn the natural human tendency to create societies based on social stratification. The authors of each of these texts often employ a slew of different satirical methods to do so, most commonly reaching for reduction, irony, and exaggeration. Vivid and grotesque imagery also often comes up, evoking a sense of disgust within the reader. With the help of these devices, the authors argue that people often reduce the stature of others in stratified societies, allowing for violence to emerge. They prove that people become desensitized to the pain of one another, normalizing it and becoming indifferent to it. They finally reason that in societies based on rankings, people fight for the highest place, replacing compassion with competition. The authors make the reader understand how stratified societies turn others into their worst nightmares.

Works Cited

Adjei-Brenyah, Nana Kwame. “Friday Black.” 2018.

Swift, Jonathan. “A Modest Proposal.” 1729.