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Humanities

2 December 2022

The Strength of Effective Satire: An Analysis of "A Modest Proposal"

In the 1720s, the livelihood of the Irish was at an all time low. Due to the constant and oppressive control of England and poor harvests in the region, people in Ireland started to beg for food and money. As time went by, they started to fill the streets. Some people even resorted to cannibalism. Jonathan Swift saw the state of Ireland around him and wanted to call out English authorities to make them more responsible for their actions. The result of this was "A Modest Proposal", a satirical piece that has stood the test of time due to its effective criticism of authority still being relevant hundreds of years after it was written. In "A Modest Proposal", Jonathan Swift's use of irony to undermine his solution and strong use of reduction serves to effectively show the flaws of authorities taking actions that disregard the well-being of those that are less fortunate.

There are many points in the text where Swift expresses a sentiment that directly contrasts with the course of action that he is proposing. The first thing of note is the title of the piece: "A Modest Proposal". Despite what this title suggests, Swift's proposal is far from modest. He argues that in order to reduce the rampant poverty and hunger that plagues the streets of Ireland, people should eat their babies. Though this is an extreme and inhumane course of action, Swift completely disregards its ethical issues in

favor of demonstrating how it would improve the economy and how it would benefit humanity. This approach effectively mocks the actions of authorities, showing how they downplay their actions to make themselves look better, even if the actions they take are horribly corrupt. Additionally, while Swift is building up to his solution, he also argues that his solution will prevent the action of “voluntary abortions”, saying that it is “too frequent among us, [the action of] sacrificing the poor innocent babes.” In order to support his point, Swift directly contradicts it in the same breath. Even though he acts as if sacrificing babies for abortions is a horrid action that needs to be stopped as soon as possible, sacrificing the lives of babies for nourishment is something that he actively encourages. This further demonstrates how wealthy authorities often have to contradict themselves and disregard the feelings of the people they are serving in order to take a course of action that is ultimately only for their own self-gain.

Throughout the piece, Swift constantly reduces the status of humans to emphasize how authorities only see people below them as a statistic or tool with little value beyond that. There are many instances where babies are often compared to animals in a slaughterhouse. He discusses how baby skin could be used to create “admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen,” not unlike the usage of cow leather. This is an example of burlesque, since Swift imagines people of the higher class doing something considered lowly and savage. It is like saying that the decisions of the British authorities in regards to Ireland ends up hurting everyone, including the authorities themselves. This usage of reduction also serves to show how the authorities really feel about the people they claim are benefitting from their solutions: easily expandable nuisances that can be used to benefit those higher up.

Women in particular are reduced to breeders that can only produce literal baby food, demonstrating that the authorities intentionally discriminate against certain demographics of people that are different from them. All of these messages are conveyed by showing the problems with the use of an extreme example that strips the humanity of people as opposed to just simply saying what those problems are.

There is a reason why “A Modest Proposal” is still used as inspiration for many modern satirical works hundreds of years after it was written. Due to its use of contradictory language and dehumanization of victims, Swift is able to effectively shed light on the various issues regarding British control of Ireland and the actions of self-serving authorities in general. Even if Ireland specifically is not suffering from these issues anymore, many other developing countries and smaller communities are oppressed due to the actions of authorities. Effective satires like “A Modest Proposal” follow the tried and true rule of “show, don’t tell”. The issues that satires call out become evident when looking deeper into satirical devices used in the piece, while other forms of writing have to directly state the issues.