

Charles Tang

Kristen Small

Humanities

2 December 2022

The Use of Baby-Eating in Highlighting Societal Issues

Many argue that society has to be improved. Hopefully, that doesn't mean we resort to eating babies. In the early 18th century, the Irish suffered through a widespread famine and most lived in impoverished conditions. To spread awareness of this issue in the English upper class, Jonathan Swift wrote a satirical essay, "A Modest Proposal," which outlines an inhumane solution to poverty by consuming babies. On the other hand, contemporary author Neil Gaiman's "Babycakes" uses the act of consuming babies for a different purpose—to inspire acts of conservation and preservation in humanity. Although Swift's "A Modest Proposal" and Gaiman's "Babycakes" both utilize the concept of consuming newborns to highlight societal problems, Swift's prose targets the upper class with his excessive appeal to logos while Gaiman's story targets the general population by using shorter invective statements.

In order to highlight the comedic effects of the proposed baby-eating solution, both satirical texts use rhetorical devices such as vivid imagery extensively. Swift's argument to solve Irish poverty involves creating an economic market for the consumption of babies. He proposed that the English wealthy would benefit from a new kind of delicacy: "the fore or hind quarter [of the baby]...seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled" (Swift 5). Readers of this satirical piece would initially be surprised by this inhumane statement. By detailing baby-eating with "pepper or salt," Swift effectively conveys his message to those who relate most to eating delicacies—the English wealth—that the Irish poor are treated poorly.

Furthermore, this essay constructs a non-disagreeable argument that eating babies is cruel and barbaric, which forces his English readers to accept that the Irish should be treated more fairly. Gaiman, on the contrary, utilizes imagery to spread awareness to the general public about the excessive waste of materials. Much similar to how current humanity describes food or clothing manufacturing, Gaiman describes that “baby flesh is tender and succulent. We flayed their skin and decorated ourselves in it” (Gaiman 1). The evocative comparison between human consumption and baby killing effectively communicates the message that over-consumption should be addressed. Gaiman’s use of imagery differs from Swift’s because he targets the general public rather than the English wealthy by drawing connections between ordinary concepts, such as eating “tender” meat and wearing “decorated” clothing. Swift’s satirical piece, however, hopes to change the thinking of the wealthy in the 18th century by making analogies to fine dining. Overall, satirical imagery can be used in different contexts to improve arguments targeted to specific populations.

Second, Swift’s most common satirical technique is his appeal to logos and *reductio ad absurdum*, where the author analyzes a problem to the logical extreme. When attempting to convince the reader of the baby-eating solution, Swift analyzes calculations of potential economic benefits. Swift claims that the “maintenance of an hundred thousand children cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece per annum, [thus] the nation’s stock will be thereby increased fifty thousand pounds per [year]” (Swift 9). First, the cost of maintaining children is calculated purely using absurd logic and disregarding all ethical considerations. Then, Swift calculates the potential revenue from the child-eating industry to be “fifty thousand pounds each year.” This unethical logic successfully mocks the English wealthy by appealing to their economic thinking—18th century economists often hoped to increase their “stock.” Using more

logos, Swift parodies a wealthy yet uncaring persona, which communicates to his target audience that they are uncaring and need to improve.

On the other hand, Gaiman's "Babycakes" contains invective statements and parataxis to subtly point out society's obvious flaw. In order to represent the brutality of humans, Gaiman explains that "we scarred [babies] and scalded them. We burned them. We clamped them and planted electrodes into their brains. We grafted, and we froze and we irradiated" (Gaiman 2). These actions, such as "burn," "clamp," and "scald," are callous and inhumane, which effectively attracts the reader's attention to reflect on their own behaviors. Additionally, these lines exhibit parataxis due to their repetitive and short nature; this stylistic choice differs significantly from the long-winded explanations of Swift and provides a much more succinct reminder about the problem of conservation. Gaiman utilizes this style to appeal to his intended audience—the general public—because the simple yet forceful sentences allow readers to draw connections between the statements and the purpose of the satire. In addition to using a more concise structure in "Babycakes," Gaiman openly ridicules humanity by impersonating a clueless man wondering "where they [the babies] went. We didn't even see them go" (Gaiman 2). Gaiman acts as an absent-minded and clueless narrator, leaving readers with the impression that humans are doomed to dig their own graves. General readers can more easily recognize the close-minded narrator's flaws because they can quickly respond to the narrator's poor judgments. Contrary to Gaiman, Swift analyzes the situations as a parodical upper-class educator, which can better convey his satire's message to the English wealthy. Thus, the effectiveness of satires is heavily influenced by the tone and how they relate to the intended audience.

In conclusion, the structure of satirical arguments determines the effectiveness of the satire in reaching the intended audience; Gaiman's "Babycakes" uses brief exaggerated

statements to appeal to the general population, while Swift's "A Modest Proposal" builds lengthy logical conclusions to change the views of the English wealthy. Since baby-eating is not a usual custom of modern societies, readers of these satires understand that something is inherently wrong in their arguments. Thus, it is vital that we bring change to this world, even if it starts from realizing that baby-eating is wrong.

Works Cited

Gaiman, Neil. *Babycakes*. 1 January 1990. *Goodreads*,

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17285917-babycakes>.

Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal*. Cricket House Books LLC, 2019. Accessed 2 December 2022.