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Humanities - L Section

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### Sir Jon's Immodest Proposal

In the 1700s, Ireland's ever-increasing population and the increasing scarcity of food had created a nationwide hunger crisis. The Anglican upper class were mostly ignoring the situation, and out of the few people who acknowledged the problem, most approached it as a logical riddle, rather than a matter of countless lives and deaths. Jonathan Swift, an Anglican essayist born and raised in Dublin, was frustrated by the indifference of his fellow Englishmen to the Irish plight. In his opinion, it was the responsibility of the English landlords to care for their Irish subjects. In "A Modest Proposal," Jonathan Swift satirizes logical reasoning and the Anglicans' treatment of the Irish poor to simultaneously alienate readers from his Anglo-Protestant persona and draw them closer to his cause.

Like many logical pamphlets of the time, "A Modest Proposal" begins with a problem statement; however, Swift's statement also serves to set up his persona of a well-informed upperclassman. In the first lines, Swift reduces Irish mothers to "beggars of the female sex." (3) His persona, who will henceforth be referred to as Sir Jon, is more concerned with the effect that the Irish beggars, who "[importune] every passenger for alms," (3-4) have on "[the] great town" (1) of Dublin. Sir Jon is a caricature of the Anglican upper class, who are more concerned about the effect which Irish poverty has on them than they are about the hunger crisis. Through him, Swift also reduces the Irish children to no more than "a very great additional grievance;" (11) moreover, he believes that this "is agreed by all parties." (9) Irish parents themselves might love their children, but Sir Jon ignores this perspective. This suggests that the intended readers of "A Modest Proposal" are English nobility who are likely to agree with him. Sir Jon states that

anyone who could make the Irish children “sound and useful members of the commonwealth, would deserve... to have his statue set up.” (14) This is an exaggeration of the English self-centeredness, for it suggests that those who try to help the Irish, such as himself, do so for personal gain. Through the problem statement of “A Modest Proposal,” Swift develops the voice of a self-centered Englishman who is mostly concerned by the effect which Irish poverty has on him; the persona’s opinions are relatable to Swift’s readers, but also jab at their character flaws via caricature.

Through his persona, Swift applies hard analytical reasoning and mathematics to produce a seemingly compelling case for his solution; that said, his broad generalizations and reduction of humanitarianism to numbers highlight the fallibility of logic. To set the stage for his solution, Sir Jon refers to a newborn as “just dropped from its dam,” (22) and further reduces Irish mothers from beggars to “breeders.” (35) It was a common belief among Anglicans that the Irish had brought famine upon themselves through excessive reproduction. By reducing the problem of Irish poverty to one of population control, Swift satirizes this belief and shows his readers how ridiculous it is. Sir Jon notes that children under 12 are “no saleable commodity,” (52) and those above 12 “will not yield above three pounds.” (52-53) Though it is clearly immoral to sell children, the persona is only concerned that the child will not turn a profit since “the charge of nutriments and rags [was] at least four times that value.” (54-55) In this case, the morally correct decision to not sell a child is also the most logical choice. Hence, here his logic seems to provide a strong case regardless of its flaws.

Swift goes on to illustrate that the logical choice and the moral choice do not always line up. Sir Jon now proposes that, at a year old, children are sold for their meat. This is as morally horrific as selling a live child; however, this time, Sir Jon shows that selling is the most logical

solution. He has “already computed the charge of nursing a beggar’s child... to be about two shillings per annum, rags included.” (86-87) The situational irony here is that though Sir Jon is supposedly ending Irish poverty, instead of focusing on making sure the children receive better clothes, he simply accepts that they will wear rags. This assumption change the problem entirely. Swift shows that Anglicans like Sir Jon are only interested in keeping the Irish barely alive. With his calculation that “no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child,” (88-89) Sir Jon shows that, through his plan, a mother can earn 8 shillings on each child, which is enough to support her until she gives birth again. Logically, Sir Jon’s solution works, but none of the readers are likely to accept it; through this, Swift shows that logic and math cannot support a morally unjust solution.

Through his persona’s lack of pathos in “A Modest Proposal”, Swift finally illustrates the folly in treating the Irish as a problem rather than as humans. Sir Jon says that “[he] can think of no one objection, that will possibly be raised against [his] proposal.” (187) If the Irish are truly just a nuisance to be dealt with, his solution will certainly suffice. However, the violence and obscenity in Sir Jon’s descriptions, such as “buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife,” (99-100) reduce his solution to absurdity. The readers realize that Sir Jon and his solution are inhumane, and, consequentially, they must acknowledge that the Irish are humans just like themselves.

Swift finishes “A Modest Proposal” with a call to action that urges the Anglicans to truly help the Irish. After having laid out all his logical solution, Sir Jon says “let no man talk to me of other expedients.” (192) These expedients include “taxing [the] absentees at five shillings a pound,” (192-193) and “teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants.” (200-201) Swift's use of verbal irony to state the solutions which he truly supports as

those which his persona outright rejects further limns the contrast between him and the persona. Whereas his persona is a caricature of what the Anglicans currently are, Swift is showing them what they could be. According to Sir Jon, Swift's solutions are untenable because there is not even "some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice." (207-208) This evokes guilt in the readers who are at fault for not providing that "hearty and sincere attempt". In turn, it pushes them to work towards the real solutions, so that those suggested by Sir Jon will never be required.

Ultimately, Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is a masterpiece of satire; that said, it was not successful at the time it was written. One possible reason is that nobody took Swift seriously. The idea of eating children may have seemed so ridiculous that the readers saw Swift's entire essay as a joke. If so, they may have never bothered to read between the lines and understand the true meaning of his work. For example, Swift doesn't provide logical benefits of eating babies to support that solution, but rather to show the flaws in logical reasoning itself. A quick read-through might not achieve that distinction. In general, any satire runs the risk of being misunderstood, and "A Modest Proposal" is no exception. Moreover, Swift's readers might have not even known that "A Modest Proposal" was satirical. Regardless of its success at the time, in the modern day, "A Modest Proposal" is rightly recognized as an exemplary satire. Swift's piece expertly develops and satirizes the familiar persona of an Anglo-Protestant to illustrate the folly of the Age of Reason as well as of the Anglican indifference to the Irish plight.