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Babies as Animals: The Use of Satire in Controversial Topics

Satire is meant to be a mirror into one's soul; a sort of self-reflection that reveals the impurities within. It's a form of social commentary, in which the author of the satire highlights a certain aspect of society that they dislike. As such, satire can be very effective at promoting change, at least if the reader can understand what it's satirizing, but it can also fall short, as the reader can dismiss it as too fantastical. The differences between how satire and simple non-fiction writing can express the necessity of change to the reader is vast, and both have their strengths and weaknesses. In this case, a satirical and non-satirical essay are two examples of articles dealing with the same topic - animal abuse - but different types of writing: satirical or non-satirical. The satirical piece, "Babycakes" by Neil Gaiman, describes a dystopia in which all of the animals are gone, and babies are used for all the uses that animals were needed for. The *New York Times* article, "Animal Cruelty or the Price of Dinner?" by Nicholas Kristof, attempts to persuade readers against eating chicken by elaborating on various cases of animal cruelty. The horror invoked by vivid descriptions and an eerily nonchalant persona in the satirical article "Babycakes" conveys its message more effectively than the straightforward manner that "Animal Cruelty or the Price of Dinner?" is written.

Neil Gaiman develops empathy for abused animals through comparing babies to animals, and by establishing the persona of "Babycakes" as someone who is emotionless and utterly

unaffected by any moral liabilities. When faced with the dilemma of what to do when all the animals are gone, humanity decides to use babies as animals instead. A particularly gruesome use of babies that the persona doesn't even flinch at is, "The babies breathed our smoke, and the babies' veins flowed with our medicines and drugs, until they stopped breathing or until their blood ceased to flow." The imagery of doing these things to any living thing, especially babies, is horrifying. It is also particularly effective, because readers can see themselves in this sentence. As humans, people really do pump animals' "veins" with "medicines and drugs" and have them "[breath] our smoke," "until they [stop] breathing or until their blood [ceases] to flow," because people consider human beings as superior to animals, and use them to test drugs before they can be tested on humans. As human beings, people say to ourselves exactly what the persona says: "It [is] hard of course, but it [is] necessary." People use this idea that animal testing is "necessary" to overlook the abuse that stems from it. Gaiman shows this utterly flawed way of thinking to dehumanize the persona, and establish the idea that anyone who would do such a thing to babies, and by extension, animals, is evil. This forces readers to confront their own selves and realize that they are just as guilty as the persona in the story. Humans also abuse animals, for the same reasons the persona abuses babies. Because humans can better empathize with babies being hurt, the use of satire in this particular topic is able to convey the topic of animal abuse better than the conventional article.

In "Animal Cruelty or the Price of Dinner?", Kristof attempts to persuade readers of animal cruelty in the food industry through a straightforward approach, with various bits of humor inserted throughout. Kristof first tries to establish a problem by presenting facts such as, "Moreover, Leah Garces of Compassion in World Farming argues that modern chicken genetics

constitute a form of abuse: It is inhumane, she says, to breed a bird with a huge breast that its legs can barely support,” and “in the United States this year, almost nine billion chickens will be dangled upside down on conveyor belts and slaughtered; when the process doesn’t work properly, the birds are scalded alive.” This is a decent approach, and if Kristof had elaborated on the cruelties and hardships that animals in the food industry face, he would have been able to show the reader why the food industry needs to change. However, this method of persuasion falls short, because Kristof tries to cater the article to a larger audience, and get them to understand the problem, instead of focusing on persuading the reader that animal cruelty needs to stop. To this effect, Kristof uses humor, such as “Look, I don’t believe in reincarnation. But if I’m wrong, let’s hope you and I are fated to come back as puppies and not as chickens,” and “To watch the video is to develop an appetite for soy,” in order to capture the reader’s attention and keep them engaged. However, by doing this, Kristof is undermining his own arguments by saying to the reader that the issues shouldn’t be taken seriously. In contrast to the “Babycakes” article, Kristof doesn’t ask the reader any hard questions at all. Kristof doesn’t question the reader’s morality, rather he attempts to reveal the flaws of morality in the food industry. Because most readers aren’t directly connected to the food industry, this article is much less personal, and thus doesn’t affect the reader as much. In this case at least, humor is not an effective way to address animal cruelty, and though Kristof manages to bring the problem to the attention of the reader, he doesn’t make a lasting impact.

Overall, “Babycakes” is more effective in its argument than “Animal Cruelty or the Price of Dinner?” because it is much more personal, and readers can see parts of themselves within the persona. As human beings, people tend to dismiss issues that have no connection to them at all.

However, because humans identify with babies more than they do with chickens, and the very idea of any harm to them is abhorrent to them, Gaiman is able to get the reader to empathize with animals through something that people do have a connection to. He crafts a world in which babies are abused as much as animals are, and illustrates the atrocities that people commit. Readers don't get the same level of personal connection in the New York Times article. This may be due to an inherent flaw in the non-fiction genre, but Kristof isn't able to connect to the reader as much. A notable example of how the diction and word choice are much more pointed and heart-wrenching in "Babycakes" than in "Animal Cruelty or the Cost of Food?" is the difference between: "let's hope you and I are fated to come back as puppies and not as chickens," (Kristof) versus the much more serious but effective: "We flayed their skin and decorated ourselves in it. Baby leather is soft and comfortable" (Maitreyi). Of these quotes, "Babycakes" is much more shocking and profound. It instills a sense of horror and disbelief in the reader. As such, it stays with the reader longer than "Animal Cruelty or the Price of Dinner", which, in comparison, is not as engaging a read. Because "Babycakes" is more memorable, it makes the case for animal cruelty much better than "Animal Cruelty or the Price of Dinner" does.

Overall, "Babycakes" is more effective in highlighting the issue of animal abuse when compared to "Animal Cruelty." In "Babycakes" Gaiman holds a mirror to the reader, forcing them to see the animal abuse as a very personal issue. "Animal Cruelty," on the other hand, does not have that same personal level of connection, and thus does not ultimately affect the reader in the same way, because people are likely to dismiss it as a chicken farmer's problem instead of one of societal urgency.

Works Cited

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