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A Modest Proposal or an Attack?

Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" was written in 1729 in order to address what he felt was the problem of Ireland in the early eighteenth century. In this pamphlet, Swift's main claim is that the people of Ireland are only driven by money. He explains that the poor cannot function in a society where money is the only important thing and he believes that someone needs to do something to stop it. He proposes the "solution" of eating children to help the Irish get back on their feet and bring more money into the economy. This essay is a satire which may have been hard for readers to understand, but Swift's audience at the time of its publishing would have grasped the irony because that was what they were used to. Swift has a successful argument by using the combination of ethical, logical, and emotional appeals to manipulate the reader into feeling that the poor are being treated horribly by the wealthy, and want to do something about it.

Swift was born in Ireland in the late 1600s and was an established author and a member of the clergy. He wrote many satirical essays in the 1700s, especially about politics and religion. He liked to attack the Roman Catholics and Calvinists, which is shown in the essay as well. He also tried to help cut back taxes for the Irish clergy but was rejected by England (Cody). Because of his background, he was well respected, and since he was not poor, his audience could identify with him more. However, the audience would have to already know Swift's history because he

does not reveal much about his credentials in the pamphlet. Throughout the whole essay, Swift maintains a voice of knowledge and throws in numbers and fake statistics to back up his claim.

His audience trusts him, especially at the beginning of the pamphlet because he sounds like he knows what he is talking about and brings in his own personality by using first person. However, the fact that his audience is made up of the people he is attacking, means that they are less likely to do anything about the issue.

The combination of logical and emotional appeals is what makes this work so famous. Swift evokes feelings from the reader as well as tells them why Ireland is in its state. Because the essay is a satire and is full of sarcasm and irony, Swift is able to get his point across but in a very subtle way. The beginning of the essay is an example of how he brings emotion, describing Ireland as “a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town...when they see streets...crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags...” (263). This first paragraph gives a vivid image and allows his audience to feel sorry for the beggars and want to eliminate the sad state. It is at this time that Swift lets his readers know that he has a solution for this problem but does not reveal it just yet, giving the reader a sense of hope. He then explains that “a young healthy child is...a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food” (265) shocking the readers dramatically. The normal connotation that follows cannibalism is one of disgust and anger at whoever suggested it, which is exactly what Swift intends. He elaborates on how good the children will taste and the different ways to cook them, just to make sure that the reader is horrified enough by this suggestion.

After the audience is angry and horrified at his suggestion, Swift subtly puts in his logic. His claim of causality is that the greedy people of Ireland caused the problems and that they

should be mad at themselves for being so gluttonous instead of at him for suggesting such a horrible solution. “I grant that this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children” (265) shows Swift assumes a generalization of the wealthy. He believes that the landlords contribute to the beggar problem, because they take advantage of the poor and make them pay enormous amounts of money to keep a place to live. Later in the essay he address the landlord issue again stating that children for sale would be beneficial because, “the poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own...their corn and cattle being already seized and money a thing unknown” (267). This quote stresses how much Swift is annoyed with the greedy landlords who take advantage of the poor. The point here is for the reader to feel sorry for the poor and angry at the landlords. Swift also gives other causes for Ireland’s dilemmas by stating the advantages that eating children gives the country.

One positive gain would be that it would “lessen the number of Papists...hoping to take their advantage by the absence of so many good Protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country than to...pay taxes against their conscience...” (267). Once again, this quote shows how important money is and people will exploit their jobs in order to make more. This also portrays Swift’s perception of the Catholics; he feels that they are money hungry and not helpful to people as they claim.

Another area that eating children would help in is marriage. Swift tells his audience that men do not pay attention to their wives unless it is to beat them or rape them, because they are too busy thinking about their farms and how much money they can make off of it. If the women were pregnant with children to be sold, the men would then care more about their wives because

they would be bringing in money (267-68). This statement again demonstrates that the country is driven by money and whatever it takes to make more of it, which is Swift's point.

Swift's essay has become a famous work because of its shocking nature and its ability to make a point at the same time. The significance of this pamphlet is to prove how people are greedy and should try to help the poor instead of exploiting them to gain more money. His use of ethics, logic, and emotion allow the reader to understand and accept his point, as well as want to do something about it, which makes his argument successful.

Works Cited

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