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The Problems with Jonathan Swift's Modest Proposal

The article "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift was an idea to ending the poverty problems that the country of Ireland had at the time. This problem was specifically in Dublin, one of the largest cities in Ireland during 1729. England had complete control of the Irish territory for over five hundred years, which in turn made Ireland into a colony where the British would just take what they wanted for gain and would not improve the conditions of the territory itself. They also cut off trade to the Irish territory. This led to poverty and the destruction of the Irish economy and created a huge population of people living under the poverty line. Many people, specifically children, had to resort to stealing to be able to provide food for themselves and their families. The narrator's ideas were not humane ones because he suggested ideas of cannibalism and human trafficking of children to help decrease the population of them. This suggests that the narrator would not use ethics to get support from the audience, but he would try and anger them and make them feel bad for not doing anything about the poor children. The narrator does not appeal to pathos to help his idea, and not logos because he has no backing evidence for his statistics or claims. He is trying to suggest evil actions and put it on the weight of higher- and middle-class people in Ireland. This was done as a joke however to anger the public by the author. The narrator is different from the author, as it depicts him thinking that infanticide is a good idea.

The article starts off by describing the most common sites in the city of Dublin. As the narrator wanders the streets, he talks about how he sees a huge population of poor female beggars who have no opportunities to work and provide for their children. These children can be more than a normal household has today, which can be anywhere from four to six children. These children grow up living in famine, and they grow up on the streets learning to steal because it is the only way they know how to provide for themselves. (Swift 53). The narrator also goes into controversial topics, talking about how some of the children are aborted or the mothers murder their children to prevent them from suffering, or because they cannot take care of their children. The narrator also explains that children are innocent, and they do not know any better. So, all they learn and all they know their whole lives is how to steal and kill others in order to gain for themselves only. This creates a terrible economy and create a huge poverty line. The narrator shows this problem to suggest that his idea is good.

The narrator provides information here that appeals to the reader's ethics or what is called ethos. However, these appeals were not great ones because the narrator supported these types of crimes. He described how people must steal to get what they need for themselves. He encourages this type of behavior and sees it as an opportunity to make the children useful. One of the first lines in the article appeals to ethics, by explaining "These mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country, to fight for the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes." (Swift 52). Other forms of ethical appeal described in the article include abortion, murder, child slavery, and the purchase of people like they are objects. These are considered morally and ethically wrong by society and should be prevented. However, the narrator has no issues with these, and shows that the audience can't relate to his ethics. This is because he

suggests evil actions to help the poverty problem and the audience cannot relate because most people do not support such actions.

Before the narrator describes his solution to the problem, he told the audience his information about this problem with statistics of the population that is under the poverty line. These statistics were not valid because there is no clear evidence of where they came from. He describes that out of a population of one million five hundred thousand people, there are a total of two hundred thousand people, including mainly women and children, who live under the poverty line. He describes how easy it would be to consume the children if there was no other use for them. It is described here in this article that “In A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents and Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public (1729) Swift exploits the age-old discourse of ethnic defamation against the Irish that had legitimated the English colonization of Ireland for centuries. One of the most damning elements in Swift's use of this discourse is that of cannibalism.” (Chowdhury). Second, he proposes an idea that there are more ways for someone to pay for something they want than just using currency. If the person does not have money, they do however own something valuable, which can help pay rent for a person that needs a home. He also suggested selling the poor children. The narrator says that his idea of using children and infants as a substitute would better the higher-class society so that there are fewer poor people living in Ireland. This would create a more structured and less miserable society of people that live together in Ireland.

The narrator here gives an example of logos, which is the appeal to logic. The narrator gives many examples here where he talks about statistics of poverty within Ireland during this time. This line gives his information: “The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about 200,000 couple, whose

wives are breeders; from which number I subtract 30,000 couple, who are able to maintain their own children, (although I apprehend there cannot be so many under the present distresses of the kingdom) but this being granted, there will remain 170,000 breeders” (Swift 53). Statistics is based upon math, which is based upon logical thinking. By reading facts like statistics, the reader can really believe the author’s ideas. The author also gives facts that are notable to the reader to consider when decreasing the poverty live in Ireland. It was said that if more people had food to eat, that would also increase marriages, which would also create a more structured society. This is also true because being overweight or bigger than the average person was considered attractive back then because it was considered a social status. Eating a lot of food can cause obesity or weight problems but being overweight was a status of the wealthy and successful because they could afford all the food that they eat. This is a fact used to appeal to logical thinking and to appeal to the audience, where they can understand that of course everyone wants to have food to eat.

The narrator here uses examples of pathos, or the appeal to emotions. It can be argued that the ways he describes the conditions of the people living on the streets appeals to the audience’s emotions because the author wants them to understand fear, sadness, and frustration to the audience. The narrator wants the audience to feel anger as well toward his ideas because of how bad they are. He wants them to feel sorry for the people on the streets and understand that they would not want to feel this way. He explains the conditions with these lines: “But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for the children of professed beggars; it is of a much greater extent and shall take in the whole number of infants at a certain age, who are born of parents in effect as little able to support them, as those who demand our charity in the streets.” (Swift 52). He is using this to make the audience feel bad and to understand the pain, which can help convince them to do something about this problem. He makes them want to also

feel anger because the narrator has an easy solution to the problem if no one wants to do anything, which involves forms of cannibalism and the purchase of people as property. If no one wants to fix the solution in a good way, that is the only way to do it and it will make all the rich people look like bad people.

To conclude this information, the author does the best job appealing to ethics to convince his audience that they should help destroy this problem in Ireland. This is because firstly, Swift does not do a great job with his logical explanation of Ireland's poverty problem. This is because he does not cite or give any information on how he got his statistics or where his information came from, which to some people, could make it hard to believe him. Second, his appeal to emotions is not that great either because he does not describe emotions he wants the audience to feel when talking about the problem. He does not say you should feel bad or feel any certain way and he only does this indirectly. He does the best job appealing to ethics because he directly describes robbery, murder, and other horrific actions of humanity that can really get the reader to understand why this is such a major problem. The article is considered satire to make people mad, which is described here "*A Modest Proposal* is based upon what amounts, almost, to a template—a template that, as James Ward has recently implied, might be inferred from a number of contemporary tracts.¹ These include the economist David Bindon's *Scheme for Supplying Industrious Men with Money to carry on their Trades, And for better Providing for the Poor of Ireland*, which was published in 1729, the year in which Swift's *Proposal* was also published." (Walls). It was a joke that would maybe inspire the people to make a change to the poverty problem. The structure of the article goes from appealing to the reader's emotions and ethics and then appeals to logic by giving information about the problem. The author relies on his character within the community to seem like a person with good ethics and ideas to help children. This would help to make an influence on the Irish population and decrease the poverty problem. The

narrator's idea of selling poor children and eating them outraged people, but poverty would decrease because of it. This is because it was a way to get people to see the needs of the poor people, and make the author more respectable in the community.

Works Cited

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