

Kaz Erdos

Mrs. Small

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An Immodest Proposal: How Irony Creates Great Satire

In Eighteenth-Century Ireland, wealthy English and Irish landlords created financial crisis amongst the lower class, sparking discord and controversy. A writer by the name of Jonathan Swift saw this inequality and sought to satirize the behaviors of the upper-class, with the goal of bringing attention towards the source of the financial crisis in Ireland. In “A Modest Proposal,” Jonathan Swift’s ironic use of rhetorical devices throughout his proposed solution to a disastrous financial problem exposes the upper-class as ignorant, selfish, and disconnected from society, as his grotesque proposal is shaped for their appeal, thus placing the blame of the wealth disparity in Ireland towards the targeted group, with the intention of creating a more responsible and sustainable society, especially within the upper-class. Through the success of these devices and tactics, Swift creates one of the most famous and prominent works of satire known to date.

While setting the stage for the problem, Swift’s use of a despairing yet self-absorbed tone in his persona works to represent a speaker who is strongly disconnected with the context of the issue, thus detracting the credibility of the persona amongst the general public. Swift’s imagery of the state of Ireland is commenced with the mention of “beggars of the female sex, followed by three four, or six children, all in rags,” illuminating an inherent distaste for the poor that the speaker seems to have. This tone comes off as more observational, rather than empathetic, distancing the speaker from the struggling subjects and thus paralleling and highlighting the

ignorance the rich usually have towards the conditions in their country. The hints of disgust apparent in the speaker's tone illuminates the lower-class as impure and in need of fixing, purification, or in this case, removal. Even further, a read may imply that Swift's persona is not sympathizing with the poor, but rather the wealthy who have to observe their suffering. Swift mentions his "intention is very far from being confined... It was of a much greater extent," which sways his persona's initially proposed desire to help away from genuineness to selfishness, giving notions of a savior complex, which is illustrated as a commonality amongst rich and selfish people. In all, Swift looks to build ethos not with his targeted audience, but rather the audience he is wishing to satirize, which ingeniously exposes the latter as having the follies that he emulates with his persona.

The statistics that Swift uses are designed to objectify and dehumanize a vast, struggling populace and replace them with numbers, emulating the tactics used by the upper-class at the time, and thus evoking resentment towards the rich in his audience. By making calculations such as "subtract[ing] fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry, or whose children die," Swift's persona is most likely to turn off any readers who have struggled with any of the issues he factors into his equation, leaving not many inhabitants of Ireland to be able to identify with his claims. In that way the persona is unsuccessful at appealing to the majority, and rather is designed to appeal to the absolute minority, thus successfully demonstrating the injustice of generally disliked peoples taking power. To go along with this, these statistics paint the speaker as condescending, as they suggest that he thinks he knows the people of Ireland better than they know themselves. There is no relatability to be had in these statistics, which effectively adds to Swift's satire and his claim of the baseless actions that the ruling class take on their inhabitants.

For a common reader, these numbers are as good as arbitrary, since they hold little to no meaning in the daily lives of so many. The opinions of an “eminent French physician” and a “very knowing American” only further this condescension and baselessness of Swift’s satirical proposal, as they suggest that people of other nations are superior to the Irish. The speaker’s value of these foreign opinions over the opinions of the Irish people themselves parallels the corrupt practices of powerful people, such as clergymen, creating an aristocratic power relationship between the speaker’s group of people and the commoners. This contrasts the appeal these foreign opinions have with upper-classmen, as Swift suggests with the inclusion of these claims. In all, Swift’s use of logic and data mimics the overgeneralization and objectification that many low-class Irish citizens are subject to.

Most prominently, Swift’s heavy use of ironic statements reduce the characteristics of the rich to absurdity, even suggesting the inferiority in the morals of the upper-class. In a tactic known as *reductio ad absurdum*, Swift’s description of voluntary abortion as “sacrificing the poor innocent babies” contradicts the morals of his proposed plan to the fullest extent, revealing a potentially more sinister motive behind this proposal (rather than out of empathy). His ironic suggestion of babies being used for “admirable gloves for ladies” detracts from the original goal of his proposal to aid the people of Ireland, exposing the materialistic motives behind the proposal. In fact, Swift compounds on his strategy to paint the rich as driven by vanity rather than concern for the poor with this irony, enhancing his satire with more negative depictions of the rich. Further, the speaker’s description of people who like child meat as “fine gentlemen” ironically illuminates a potential takeaway: that the so-called “fine gentlemen” that rule society are perhaps more devolved and deranged than the people of the streets that they reduce down to

numbers. Swift's irony demonstrates that the wealthy not only accept this cannibalistic derangement, but also take it a step further and *enjoy* it. Swift's recommendation of the new food for landlords is said to be because "[landlords] have already devoured most of the parents," which attacks the ignorance and greediness of landlords through an invective disguised ironically as a compliment. Thus, Swift is able to highlight how self-centered and therefore ignorant the upper-class can be, sparking the idea that their ignorance could be a contributing factor towards the financial crisis. Swift's irony looks to indirectly expose the horrid characteristics of the rich, and does so effectively through its presentation and inclusion in conjunction with other rhetorical appeals.

Ultimately, Swift's satire is successful due to the combination of its imagery, tone, statistics, and heavy irony, establishing it as one of the cornerstones of satire today. Swift masterfully combines all of his techniques to create a unique balance between his insults, humor, and grotesqueness, creating an engaging and informative satire that exposes the follies of the rich and draws attention towards the cause of the wealth disparity in Ireland. With the combination of these effects of the satire, Swift successfully relates the follies of the rich directly with the struggles of the poor, thus advertently levying the blame for the financial crisis on the upper-class.