

A modest proposal rhetorical analysis



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Jonathan Swift's use of satire in his writing of *A Modest Proposal* allows him to criticize his audience and make his main point without directly stating it. Swift creates a man who appears concerned and sympathetic towards the poor people while still agreeing and identifying with the upper class of Ireland. The reader's confidence in the speaker quickly diminishes when he reveals his "modest proposal" to eat children in order to effectively reduce poverty and overpopulation. Swift's main goal in his pamphlet is quite different from the explicit goal of the speaker and so Swift writes a satire in order to get his implicit point across. Swift strategically creates a speaker who initially appears sensitive and trustworthy, however the speaker is not reliable because he is just as illogical and overdramatic as the people that Swift is criticizing. Swift is extremely intentional in crafting a complex character to tell his story. The speaker initially comes across as a respectable man. He first sympathizes with the poor people in Ireland and makes himself appear sensitive and empathetic. For example, he says, the "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" (Swift, 831). The speaker also gets on the upper class citizens' good sides. He rubs their egos by referring to them as "a very worthy person, a true lover of his country, and whose virtues I highly esteem" (834). He attempts to gain the respect from all the citizens of Ireland in order to get people to actually listen to and consider his argument. Without this trust and respect, the reader would dismiss the speaker's ideas immediately due to their crazy forefront. The speaker's character appears to be a trustworthy man at first, but he quickly shows his true self of being illogical and overdramatic. He gives a line of logical ideas and proposals but then says

how they are all ridiculous when compared to his idea of eating children. He says, “ let no man talk to me of other expedients: of taxing our absentees at 5s. a pound: of using neither clothes nor household furniture except what is of our own growth and manufacture: of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury” (837). By giving these simplistic and logical ideas, Swift is able to contrast them with the speaker’s grandiose and absurd idea about disposing children. Swift also makes the speaker seem rational by using quantitative analysis to show he has truly thought about his idea and that he believes it is in fact a legitimate one. As the reader evaluates what the speaker is actually saying in this numerical data, they see his illogicalness arise again. He says, “ supposing that 1, 000 families in this city would be constant customers for instant’s flesh, ... and the rest of the kingdom the remaining 80, 000” (836). This shows that the solution being proposed would only benefit one eightieth of the population, which is not anything close to helping the masses nor does it show that it’s a solution that would be very popular. A logical proposal to help the country, would consider the positives and negatives of the entire countries people. The speaker that Swift created is far from logical because of his absurd ideas but it is those ideas that also show how overdramatic he is. This is easily seen in his proposal of eating children. There is no average human being who would understand and agree with a notion of eating their own children or anyone else’s children. The speaker also shows his dramatic personality when attempting to consider the lower class. He compares abortion with his proposal, and says eating children is similar to an involuntary abortion, so it would save the poor people from the shame of having an abortion. He says, “ I doubt more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears

and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast" (832). This is making an attempt to legitimize a comparison of abortion with eating children. He is overdramatic in his statements and this paired with his lack of logic makes him a very untrustworthy proposer. The speaker needs to somehow make his idea acceptable by a powerful group of people and so he tries to show himself as a knowledgeable member of the upper class. He refers to the "famous Psalmanazar a native of the Island Famosa", because they are things the lower class people would not know about and would not refer to (835). This helps to make himself seem significant and worthwhile to listen to by the upper class people. Again to make himself seem relatable, Swift uses the words "we" and "they" often, as a way to create an "us versus them" situation. Swift makes the speaker's character this way so that the people will trust him and consider his argument. The speaker does a fairly good job of showing the reader that he is part of the upper class or at least knows enough about them to appear a part of them. Swift creates this character in order to give his true opinion on the situation in Ireland. The speaker Swift produced is shown as illogical, overdramatic, and a part, or at least very similar to, the people of the upper class. Therefore, if the speaker and the wealthy class people are so comparable then the reader can deduce that the upper class people are being illogical and overdramatic too. Through this concession of ideas, Swift shows his overall opinion about how absurd the upper class people are, and specifically how absurd their proposals are. Swift's opinions are confirmed through looking closer into what his speaker says. He believes his ideas are "obvious" and of the "highest importance" just like the people in Ireland think about their ideas (834). The fact that anybody would even consider eating children shows serious faults by the

person proposing it and the audience listening to it, in this case that is the speaker and the upper class people. Through the analysis of the speaker's words, one can see Swift's main goal in writing this pamphlet and why he chose to make it a satire. Simply stating his criticisms towards the upper class people would not be as influential in others seeing the problems. Everybody knows there is poverty and famine but the real core of the issue needs to be addressed. This is what Swift is doing in strategically crafting the idea of "A Modest Proposal" and crafting the speaker who gives this proposal. By comparing the speaker and the group of people he tries so hard to be a part of, with the upper class of Ireland, Swift shows that they are quite similar in their selfish plans and actions. Therefore this speaker is not at all the trustworthy man he tried to make himself seem, not only because of the crazy idea he is proposing, but because he is identical to the men proposing similar grandiose ideas. Without the use of satire throughout the entire pamphlet, the reader would not have been lead to understand Swift's actual criticism, that the upper class people are overdramatic and their proposals, as well as those of the Irish government, are just as illogical as Swift's proposal of eating children.