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### Scrutiny of Modesty

In Jonathan Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal," he proposes that the Irish, while under British rule, eat the infants of the poor Irish Catholic beggars to reduce the population and to help stimulate the local economy. The proposal consists of the beggars rearing their children to the ripe age of one and selling them off for profit to the wealthy. This would make the beggars contributors to society and would likely keep them off of the streets. Analyzing Swift's elements of argument in "A Modest Proposal" is a must in order to fully appreciate an exceptional read.

Jonathan Swift is making a claim of policy in his essay. To make a claim of policy means the writer is suggesting a solution to a problem or to change the way things are being done. In this essay, Swift is writing about over population in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland, where beggars had become rampant in the streets and would try and raise their children to beg and steal just to get by. In order to change this, Swift proposes that the children of these beggars become nourishment for the rest of the kingdom. Because he is trying to propose a solution to a problem, Swift's essay is making a claim of policy.

Swift uses many different types of support for his claim including; statistics, "expert" opinions, and an appeal to the need of safety. Statistical data shows information in numbers. Swift calculates, from the total number of infants that cannot be provided for by their parents to be a hundred and twenty thousand. However he continues to calculate saying, "I do therefore humbly offer it to the public that... twenty thousand may be reserved for breed..." (356). To this,

Swift adds, “That the remaining hundred thousand may at a year old be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune through the kingdom...” (356).

“Expert” opinions are also used in “A Modest Proposal”. He uses the “expert” opinions of a French physician and of an American acquaintance of his who lives in London. According to Swift’s American acquaintance, “... a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled...” (356). His acquaintance also informed Swift that when it comes to eating men, “...from frequent experience that their flesh was generally tough and lean, like that of [their] schoolboys, by continual exercise, and their taste disagreeable...” (357). These opinions are used to show that the only population worth eating is the infants. Infants will have seasons, just like other types of food. According to a French physician, “[It] will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March... fish being a prolific diet, there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent than any other season.” (357). By using these “expert” opinions, Swift makes his proposition more realistic.

Along with “expert” opinions and statistical support, Swift also uses a very logical appeal to the need of safety. In this he explains that, “It would increase the care and tenderness of mothers toward their children...[and] Men would become as fond of their wives during the time of their pregnancy as they are no of their mares in foal... nor offer to beat or kick them (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of miscarriage. (357). Safety is such a basic need; Swift uses this piece of support because it will be understood by everyone.

A majority of the warrants in “A Modest Proposal” are implied and not directly stated. The main warrant that must be understood is that those reading this proposal need to believe that the problem of overpopulation is actually a big enough problem and must be stopped. If the

reader does not believe the problem is significant, they will probably not get past the first paragraph or two. Another warrant that goes as implied would be that the wealthy, or those who purchase the infants as nourishment, are willing to break the social taboo of cannibalism and infanticide. Without this understanding, those who read it are not likely to get very far nor will they see eating infants as a modest proposal. A third warrant that must be understood is that the reader must truly feel that not all humans are equal. This too goes unstated but must be believed if the reader is going to be willing to eat the offspring of another human being. They must first feel that they are superior to the begging class and that infants are inferior to adults. They must also believe that they are superior to the Irish Catholic population (Papists) that the essay targets. Swift believed that that his proposal would, “greatly reduce the number of Papists, with whom [Ireland was] yearly overrun, being the principal breeders of the nation.” Lastly, it must be understood by the reader that Swift is writing to the Aristocracy. In the time “A Modest Proposal” was written, very few people were educated and literate. A majority of those that were literate were Aristocrats. He states this when he suggests that, “a well-grown, fat, yearling child, which roasted whole will make a considerable figure at a lord mayor’s feast...” (359). He also suggests this when he assumes the infant skin, “will make gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen.” (357). Therefore, it was not written for the beggars to ever read.

When it comes to Jonathan Swift’s essay “A Modest Proposal” the reader must be able to identify the claim that is set forward. They must then decide for themselves if the support for this claim is solid enough to actually support the actual proposition given by him. Lastly, the warrants, although implied, are a very important tool used by Swift. They bring the reader and the essay to the same level, by targeting his audience. Whether or not Swift’s proposal is modest or not, “A Modest Proposal” is a thought provoking essay and a worth-while read.

Work Cited

Swift, Jonathan. "A Modest Proposal." *The Structure of Argument*. Eds. Annette T. Rottenberg and Donna Haisty Winchell. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 354-361. Print.