

Cannibalism and Slavery: An Analysis of Equiano, Swift, and Rousseau.

Question-and-answer format.

Essay by Richard X. Thripp.

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Question One: Who is Olaudah Equiano's narrative, Travels, directed toward, and what point of view does the author use?

Travels is directed not only toward the slave-holders who claim to be Christians, but also the people who rely on goods produced by slaves, such as consumers of sugared tea in eighteenth-century England. It is shown that “some six to seven million slaves were transported to work on sugar plantations in the West Indies” (Fiero 616), so sugar alone was a source of much suffering. When Equiano writes, “O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, Learned you this from your God who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?” (619), he is calling out the hypocrisy in believing in a merciful, just god who gives countenance to all, except slaves. The account is written from a riveting first-person perspective, with the reflections following Equiano's thoughts: “I no longer doubted of my fate; and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted,” he vividly recalls upon seeing the slaves chained together wearing faces of “dejection and sorrow” (618). As “he mastered the English language” (616) and writes that the slave ship's crew spoke a tongue that “was very different from any I had ever heard” (618), we can deduce that Equiano's autobiography is not for the people of his original Benin tribe.

Question Two: Which conditions described by Equiano are most contrary to the ideals of the philosophes?

People being stolen away, flogged, and forced to live at the bottom of a filthy ship for the long journey to slavery—this is not at all in accord with the motto of the philosophies: “wipe out all evils” (Fiero 606). Equiano recalls, the ship is “so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself”; the fledgling slaves are “almost suffocated” (618). Even the sheep and cattle of the day were treated better! Yet our noble Thomas Jefferson almost sanctions such depravity, seeing the blacks as being “inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind,” the inferiority being “a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people” (620). It is always necessary to claim slaves to be sub-human—it is merely the device that justifies the crimes being committed. There is no other way to support the ugliness of slavery, while in tandem, holding pretty ideals such as Locke's statement that humans should “be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection” (602), or Jefferson's declaration that “all men are created equal” with the “unalienable rights” of life and liberty (604). Because slavery was such a benefit in the absence of mechanical automation, it persisted, despite contradicting enlightened thinking.

Question Three: What is the real thesis of Jonathan Swift's “A Modest Proposal”?

Anything can sound reasonable, but we cannot look just for our gain; we must also be ethical. Even Sunday-morning Christians consider killing and eating babies to be morally objectionable. What Swift really supports is not cannibalism, but instead reforms to combat poverty in Ireland, such as “taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound,” introducing “prudence and temperance,” and using “what is of our own growth and manufacture,” as exclusively as is reasonable (Fiero 623). “A Modest Proposal” is profoundly satirical writing, so

these ideas are presented as what cannot be spoken of, because there is no effort implement them. As Swift sadly concludes, “let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients, ‘till he hath at least some glympse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice” [not included in the Fiero excerpt]. The author is ingenious in his use of “shock value,” as the last paragraphs—the thesis for reform—are far more influential than they would be in an ordinary essay.

Question Four: What is the character of the narrator in “A Modest Proposal”?

“A young healthy child” is a “wholesome food” (Fiero 622); the narrator does not see the evil in killing and eating children, unlike the audience and author. Swift satirically derides his own beliefs toward the end: “let no man talk to me of other expedients,” such as “learning to love our Country,” “quitting our animosities and factions” (Catholics versus Protestants), and “being a little cautious not to sell our country and conscience for nothing” (623). The narrator dislikes these noble proposals, instead finding his or her idea of infanticide to be the way: it will “greatly lessen the number of Papists” (Roman Catholics), provide “eight shillings sterling per annum” yearly to “the constant breeders” (622), and be “a great inducement to marriage” (623) while providing a new delicacy for wealthy landlords, improving the quality of life for the poor, and ridding them of their burdensome progeny. The separation between the author and narrator is much more solid than in “[The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas](#)¹,” as Swift's “profoundly moralizing body of literature” (621) is wholly separate from the outlandish ideas that seem to be pushed seriously in “A Modest Proposal.”

1 Critical Analysis: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Richard X. Thripp.
<http://richardxthripp.thripp.com/critical-analysis-omelas-126>

Question Five: When does the reader discover Swift's irony?

While “A Modest Proposal” is in line with works of its day, such as The Satires by Juvenal, modern readers, unfamiliar with the style of writing, are totally shocked upon reading the statement, “a young healthy child is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled” (Fiero 622). While I discovered the irony upon reading that sentence (I perused Fiero's lead-in first), many may continue to think the piece is serious, perhaps even to the end where Swift makes his real proposal, which is of “parsimony, prudence, and temperance” (623). In fact, it is a safe assumption, that because Swift sustains the deadpan satire for so long, a good portion of his readers, several paragraphs in, will be convinced of his conviction. Hopefully, the statement, “a child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends” (622) is so laughable that the irony becomes obvious.

Question Six: What are the reasons for human corruption, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men? How does he want us to live?

Rousseau believes that property, surplus, and collaboration are all the seeds of corruption. His philosophy: “As long as men . . . applied themselves only to work that one person could accomplish alone and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived as free, healthy, good and happy men” (Fiero 637). This is not at all the case in the twenty-first century United States, as we rely on hundreds of others at our workplaces, and for essentials such as food, water, power, and computer networking. Rousseau laments, “how much misery and horror the human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes,” disputing “the first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, though of saying 'This is mine’” (636). As

the [QUANTA class](#)² has been well taught by [Dr. Michael Flota](#)³, as soon as it was “found to be useful for one man to have provisions enough for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced . . . [and] slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and flourish” (637)—this is the birth of surplus. We are corrupted by mechanization and the privatization of property to compete viciously with our fellow people, but in the primitive days of hunting and gathering, where the Earth had no owner, we had a more perfect society, despite its perceived obsolescence.

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Work Cited

Fiero, Gloria K. The Humanistic Tradition Volume II. 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

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