

A modest proposal vs candide



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As seen through both *A Modest Proposal* and *Candide*, both Jonathan Swift and Voltaire were committed to exposing the problems inherent to their societies, but instead of making bold proclamations about these issues, they wrote entertaining texts that used irony, especially in terms of characterization, to point them out. For example, the speaker in the essay *A Modest Proposal* can coldly discuss the economic and social benefits of killing and eating children without ever giving much thought to the moral problems.

The essay is certainly a satire that is aimed at making his contemporary readers recognize the kind of cold, calculating inhumanity of blunt rationalism when used to address social problems such as poverty and overpopulation. Like Voltaire, Jonathan Swift presents this irony through characterization—in this case, the speaker of the proposal.

Although Voltaire tends to present many problems of the Enlightenment by having multiple ironic characters, the effect is the same since the audience is drawn in and made to recognize the flaws of certain ways of thinking. The irony of the narrator of *A Modest Proposal* though, is that he can go on to criticize the moral weakness of mothers who have immoral abortions or commit infanticide.

In addition, at one point he speaks of the selling of babies as food, saying, “ I grant this food [children] will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children” (4, Swift). Like the philosopher, Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide*, the speaker in *A Modest Proposal* turn a blind

eye to other ideas or options and by doing so, represents the worst kind of politician or social planner.

This ironic character can make a statement that would seem to be purely economic without seeming to realize the awful nature of it. The powerful statement above is disguised as a blind following of the speaker's philosophy when in fact it addresses the very sad notion that England and Ireland's rich landowners really have milked the poor for all they have. Furthermore, Pangloss in *Candide*, is adherent to his own brand of philosophy called, "metaphysico-theologo-cosmolo-nigology" (12, Voltaire). He advocates the belief that "This world is the best of all possible worlds" actually causes damage to others, which is demonstrated in the scene where the Jacques is drowning and Pangloss attributes the event in typical nonsensical fashion to the fact that "the bay of Lisbon had been formed expressly for the Anabaptist to drown in." In short, although it does not make logical sense, this ironic character overlooks everything to stick to his own view of the world in much the same way the Proposer in *A Modest Proposal* does.

Both characters have a philosophy and they cannot seem to think about the larger implications of their ideas. Both Swift and Voltaire have presented characters that are portrayed ironically to point out the way actual people in either's society think. In sum, through ironic characterization within the larger context of satire in *Candide* and *A Modest Proposal*, each of these texts seeks to point out the flaws of following something blindly to point out the hypocrisy in society.